

## Penny Williams

A political champion for education in the state of Oklahoma and the city of Tulsa.

### Chapter 01 – 1:06

#### Introduction

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**Announcer:** Penny Williams served as a State Senator for Oklahoma from 1998 to 2004. Born in New York City in 1937, she attended Sarah Lawrence College, University of Tehran, and the University of Tulsa. She represented the city of Tulsa in the State House of Representatives, and was elected to the State Senate in 1998, where she ultimately became Chair of the Education Committee. Senator Williams authored important bills on education including the historic education reform legislation, House Bill 1017. Her efforts were instrumental in creating the Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics, providing public higher educational opportunities, and improving public elementary and secondary education. Before Senator Williams helped to establish a public university in Tulsa, it was the largest city in the United States without a public four-year college. The Penny Williams story is made possible by foundations and individuals who believe in preserving Oklahoma's legacy, one voice at a time, on [VoicesOfOklahoma.com](http://VoicesOfOklahoma.com).

### Chapter 02 – 8:30

#### Early Penny

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**John Erling:** My name is John Erling and today's date is April 11, 2012. Penny, if you will state your full name, your date of birth, your present age, and where you were born.

**Penny Williams:** My full name, Penny Baldwin Williams. I was born in the Doctors Hospital in the city of New York on May 6, 1937, so that would make me almost 35.

**JE:** Your present age.

**PW:** Makes me almost 75.

**JE:** They can do the math.

**PW:** Ends with a five. Sorry, John.

**JE:** Baldwin. Why were you named Baldwin?

**PW:** That's my father's name.

**JE:** We're recording this interview here in the offices of voicesofoklahoma.com in Tulsa. Your memories of grandparents, your mother's side, father's side.

**PW:** My father's side's quicker. Joe Baldwin was in New York. He was working on Wall Street. Had nine children and was said to be on his ninth million, and the market crashed. My father was the next to the next of the youngest of the nine. Arty Baldwin...

**JE:** Who was she?

**PW:** She was my grandmother, Arty. She was Joe Baldwin's wife. I have a real memory of her when I was very young, I couldn't have been more than three. I have a memory of this glass table in her house. I had never seen a glass table. It was just a memorable image. I remember nothing else about her except lace bodice.

**JE:** Tea-length.

**PW:** Yeah, I do remember the lace across the chest. My grandparents on my mother's side would take much longer because in a way my grandmother on my mother's side half raised me. I lived with her in her apartment in New York City many times.

**JE:** What was her name?

**PW:** Her original name was Atterbury. Mary Barton Atterbury. Then she married Fuller Potter, my grandfather. Then she was divorced a number of times and married a number of times, so she had lots of marriages in her checkered past.

**JE:** You lived with her in New York City?

**PW:** Mm-hmm (affirmative), because during the war, there were many times when my mother was away and she would be away for long spells of time. Many of the war years I spent with my grandmother in New York.

**JE:** Let's talk about your mother, her maiden name, where she was born, and where she grew up.

**PW:** She was Polly Potter, born in New York City. One of five children. She left New York City when my grandmother got a divorce. In those days, you didn't get divorces. The school my mother and Aunt Helen were enrolled in kicked them out because they were daughters of divorcing parents. Even though their grandfather had been one of the founders of the school, they still kicked them out.

**JE:** What school was that?

**PW:** Chapin School in New York City. They were sent south and this changed by mother's life. They were sent south to a boarding school called Fermata in Aiken, South Carolina. That began the rest of my mother's life. She became crazy about horses and she did a lot of riding and rode different people's horses and was in the first ladies' race when they allowed girls to ride.

**JE:** What years would this have been?

**PW:** This would have been in the late '30s.

**JE:** That kind of attitude about divorced people was very strong in the '30s.

**PW:** Very much so, yeah.

**JE:** Drove her out of town.

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** Wow. How old would she have been when she went to South Carolina?

**PW:** She would have been about 15 or 16, right at that important age. Her whole life became horses. She became this rider. She'd ridden before, but never fallen in love with horses, and she did when she got to South Carolina. That's where she met my stepfather eventually, when she went back to Aiken to these horse shows. She'd go back every year.

**JE:** Your father, his name, and where he grew up.

**PW:** Peter Baldwin was his name. He eventually went back to India where he'd served during the war, and started an airlines there, Cargo Airlines. Ended up taking along passengers on the Hodge and started picking up passengers in Afghanistan. He'd go up to Kabul, he and his partner, would take them to Mecca. Pilgrims got to be first just sitting on orange crates and chicken boxes and things like that. Then they got to be a real passenger airline. He eventually sold the airline, which started out purely as a cargo airline, sold it to Pan Am. He and the Afghan government were co-owners.

**JE:** Your father and mother were divorced. What age were you when they were divorced?

**PW:** I was about four or five, probably four.

**JE:** Did you establish any relationship, then, with your father?

**PW:** Yes, but it was...as he moved to India and lived out his years in Afghanistan, I never really saw much of him, maybe once every five years, except after I was married and living in Iran, then I saw more of him. He would come to see us in Tehran and we'd go over to Kabul.

**JE:** Then it was kind of a reunion of sorts.

**PW:** Yeah, getting to know him later in life.

**JE:** You had a stepfather, then.

**PW:** Joe Sheffield.

**JE:** Is he the one, then, that helped raise you?

**PW:** He did. There were two of us from my mother's marriage to Peter Baldwin. Then there was a third daughter born to my mother and Joe Sheffield. He is the one who moved us to South Carolina when the war was over. We'd been living at that point on the marine base out in Laguna Beach, California. He moved us to South Carolina.

**JE:** When you say the war, we're talking about World War II.

**PW:** World War II.

**JE:** Qualities about your mother or your stepfather that you look fondly on, that perhaps had an impression on you.

**PW:** My mother was very trusting. It started out with dogs. We always had loads of dogs. She would pick anyone up and give a ride to strangers. I remember in later years thinking, “Wow, we could have been in some pickles.” She was just always nice to people and people were always nice to her. She was very strong-willed. She gave up riding because of my stepfather, but willed riding down to her daughters so we rode every day of our lives and grew up on horses. She gave up riding because my stepfather’s sister had been killed in England riding a horse. She was thrown and died from the fall. He just had real antipathy to her ever being on a horse again, so she gave up what she loved most in life and took up hunting. We lived with all these dogs, in the house and in the kennels. She and my stepfather would go hunting and play golf. That’s what they did.

**JE:** What did Joe do for a living?

**PW:** He eventually did some work on Wall Street, but mostly he lived as a retired man. Mostly he lived on his mother’s money. What he hadn’t given to his first two wives in divorces, he shared with our family.

**JE:** Then you grew up with a love of horses and dogs because of that environment.

**PW:** Totally, yeah.

**JE:** Did you involve yourself in horse contests?

**PW:** I did all the horse shows, but I just did them locally. We even put on a horse show once in South Carolina. Eventually, when I left South Carolina I stopped riding, especially when we went to Germany and Iran.

**JE:** It was a childhood thing and you left it as an adult...

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** The horses.

**PW:** Circumstances dictated that I not ride.

## Chapter 03 – 7:30

### Off to School

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**John Erling:** In South Carolina, then, your first school you attended; what would that have been?

**Penny Williams:** That was actually a grammar school, in the days when we used to believe in grammar and we called them grammar schools. That was the public school in Camden but I will say that I was terrified of this one guy, his name was Randolph and he was

always there lurking in the stairwell when I'd come around the corner and he would scare me to death and I would come home crying from school. Eventually, my mother and other friends got together and started their own school. The upshot of my being terrified was that I had a choice. Remember that issue in education?

**JE:** Yes.

**PW:** I've always felt really, really privileged because it was like being home schooled where all these parents banded together and started the school and they used the Calvert System out of Baltimore, Maryland which was a system that mostly worked overseas in African countries and other countries. They have it in Oklahoma today, that's one of the systems they use. If you go to one of those days at the capital where they tell you about the schools, they'll have a Calvert School booth. They believe in Latin and mythology and the classics as well and geography and history, not social studies, history. We got this incredible grounding; it was really like going to a small, rural school. We were three blocks from the school; we lived on dirt roads in Camden, South Carolina. We walked to school and my friends from the neighborhood did too.

**JE:** The parents got together to do this; did they find a school building?

**PW:** Yes, they found a house; they bought the house.

**JE:** They bought a house as a school building, okay.

**PW:** Mhmm. We were in the same classrooms and there were different levels, there'd be two in one class and 10 in another, depending on the age of the children whose parents started the school.

**JE:** How many parents banded together?

**PW:** There probably were 30.

**JE:** Those parents were funding this then.

**PW:** Yes, they all pooled resources and hired these teachers. Basically, we had two main teachers, other grown-ups would help but we really had two teachers.

**JE:** I wonder if that created conversation in the neighborhood. Here are these parents who think that they're too good for the public school and so they're creating a private school.

**PW:** Probably did. The public school was not great it was certainly segregated and the school that all these parents started had higher standards; spelling and geography and mythology and all of these classical subjects, it was just an unbelievable education. When I was sent off to school as many children were in those days, back east, we don't have that tradition out west here but, in the east, a lot of people who could sent their children off to school. My parents sent me off to school and I went to Richmond, Virginia. It was a girls' school, Episcopalian school in Richmond, Virginia. Saint Catherine's and I was so grade-ready because I'd had this terrific background, this great education.

**JE:** Would that have been in the ninth grade then?

**PW:** Yes, ninth grade.

**JE:** You said segregated and I bring this up because of your work with African-Americans later on in your life. Were you around blacks much there in South Carolina where...

**PW:** Sure, all the time.

**JE:** That was part of your education, to be living in a diverse situation.

**PW:** Sure and in fact, I was a great moviegoer. This was the one thing I did, alone, other than ride horses. I would go to the white movie theater, that was the little theater and I would go to the black movie theater, I didn't know the difference. It was only later in life that I realized everybody in the theater was black and they were all so nice to me. I look back at that and just grimace. The first time I ever noticed there was this thing called segregation is when I came home in the ninth grade from school, got into the train station and found four restrooms instead of the usual two or one. I was dazzled with choices so I often went to the white ladies' rest room but I thought that was so curious. I mean I can't believe I was that old before I really was aware of the difference. The South is very integrated geographically because of the old plantation pattern, all the blacks who lived on the plantation were in various areas around these large houses so the town did not have a particular section the way Tulsa does, or the way Tulsa did when I moved here.

**JE:** Did you have blacks working for you, taking care of horses, that sort of thing?

**PW:** Oh yeah, they worked. The people at the track, we were a famous race horsing town, next to Aiken; we were kind of seen as the poor man's Aiken. Aiken is the place where Elizabeth Arden and all these fancy people had their horses.

**JE:** Where in South Carolina is Aiken?

**PW:** Aiken is over near the border kind of closer to Savannah, probably the closest town in South Carolina to the Georgian border. Aiken is North of Savannah but right near the border.

**PW:** You go in the ninth grade, through high school at Saint Catherine's Episcopal School.

**PW:** Right.

**JE:** What kind of an experience was that for you? I'm sure you were a good student.

**PW:** I wasn't that great a student; I wasn't really interested. I had a great education before I got there. What I discovered and thank heavens, was girls. There was a whole world of girls who thought the way I did or didn't think the way I did but at least we had real conversations, because my best friends in South Carolina had all been boys who lived across the street from me or down the hill. It was really great, discovering this world of girls. Unfortunately, I also discovered my boys there as well because when I got home for Christmas that year and never stopped talking, I thought my mother would lose her mind. She kept saying they're there, no. No, no, just hold up. Anyway, I'd started talking and I've never stopped.

**JE:** That didn't happen till you got into...

**PW:** Ninth grade.

**JE:** You were kind of quiet and to yourself?

**PW:** I was and my best friends were either boys or younger children I kind of took care of in the neighborhood and dogs and horses. All of a sudden, here are these wonderful girls and it had day students at the school so I would go home on weekends, eventually I would go home with other girls in the school and go to the movies.

**JE:** Do you remember any favorite songs and music or movie stars while you were in high school?

**PW:** Those were the days of Ava Gardner and Rita Hayworth, Veronica Lake, but Esther Williams is the one I remember best because she was this wonderful swimmer and diver and I loved her moves.

## Chapter 04 – 7:30

### Sarah Lawrence College

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**John Erling:** You graduated, then, in what year?

**Penny Williams:** '55.

**JE:** 1955.

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** We're you beginning to develop a certain interest subject wise in school that you knew that you probably liked to go on and pursue?

**PW:** My worst subject was English. The English teacher actually made me cry in class a number of times. She was so furious at me. It seemed to me as if it were the whole four year of Saint Catherine's that she was angry at me. It wasn't until years later that I began to realize what a debt I owed her because she kept telling me I was smarter than I thought and I had an obligation to my talent and my ability to work harder, do better. The only hint I had that maybe I was doing better was when I had a story published in the little newspaper we had at school. Also, there was a wonderful art teacher. She was so wonderful that even though I didn't have a class from her until my last year there, she, in a way, changed my life, as well, because she was our guide on a trip to Washington D.C. And we went to see the National Gallery. I will never forget that. That blew my mind, seeing some of those impressionists paintings...I remembered Renoir, in particular swirling, swirling vertical paintings, captains with women and their arms swirling on dance floors and things like that. Beautiful. Country and nature and just aghast. Then, I began

to notice that some of my parents' friends had great art. I began to look at my parents' friends in a new light, seeing them more seriously.

**JE:** Field trips can make a difference, can't they?

**PW:** Oh, yeah. This one did. This one did.

**JE:** You English teacher, as you look back, do you think, "Yeah, maybe I was being," I don't know. Is the word "lazy"...wasn't working...you recognize that later?

**PW:** Oh, yeah. I was more interested in people telling me their problems because I had been with younger children so much of the time in Camden. It was natural for me to learn about life through other people and learn about their problems and think, "Oh, yeah. Maybe I'd have some of those problems sometimes." I was much more in people than English.

**JE:** It sounds like your experience there was a good one.

**PW:** It was. It was pretty amazing.

**JE:** Then, that sent you off to college?

**PW:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** Where was that?

**PW:** Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. I had applied to a number of colleges and when I got accepted at some, I just thought that that one sounded the most interesting and the best for me.

**JE:** That's a co-ed school, liberal arts college?

**PW:** It is now and I was after the war, but then it went through its time of being all girls.

**JE:** Was it all girls when you were there?

**PW:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** Tell us about your year there. Did you get inspired there?

**PW:** I got very inspired there, especially by the end of the year. I signed up for great courses my sophomore year, things that I really was interested in. I had a great English course. What I loved most was sneaking into the auditorium and listening to Joseph Campbell. I was not in his course. He did not take anyone below Junior level. He was a teacher there and he did a lecture course. A lot of us could slip in under the curtains and stood on the stairs and listened to him. He was spellbinding.

**JE:** Tell us about him.

**PW:** Joseph Campbell was a philosopher and taught about world religions and taught about old mythologies. He was really an expert on languages and mythology and the religions of the world, all the known religions of the world. He gave different talks about various religions, not just Christianity, where as I had been from background of just purely knowing about Christianity.

**JE:** What was your Christian background?

- PW:** I had really grown up in the Episcopal Church. I'd been confirmed as Episcopalian. Then, of course, Saint Catherine's was Episcopalian. Morning, noon, and night, we had prayers, we had chapel at Saint Catherine's that was in a wonderful underground cave. It was like a cave. It was curved, so at the end of the circle, you'd see the person who was in charge of the service. We all had to do services. We all had to be in charge of services on time or another.
- JE:** As you were listening to Joseph Campbell, were you beginning to question your own faith and wondering, "Maybe there's something else out there for me."
- PW:** Not for me, necessarily. Definitely by inference, he raised questions. Back at Saint Catherine's...You were talking about field trips earlier. I remember a field trip to go hear Brian Greene; not the physicist, but the Evangelist. We went into Richmond one night to hear Brian Greene preach. I just immediately just wanted to go join him and become a missionary and live in Africa and became very spellbound by Brian Greene. I think Joseph Campbell had somewhat the same effect on me in that he's such a spellbinder. This language, there's something about language, really well spoken language, let's you out of yourself and takes you to another land. You can live in a small town like Camden, South Carolina all your life and yet live in the world. These days, we're so lucky, we have everything that'll get us to be living in the world.
- JE:** Then, because of listening to Mr. Campbell, you began to realize, "I have other interests that I can pursue." Was that in your sophomore year, then, you said you signed up for other...
- PW:** I had signed up for sophomore year, but I was working in Wyoming at a ranch that summer and my future husband was working at Fort Sill. He had been part of ROTC and he suggested we just go ahead and get married then instead of three years later after I graduated from college. I thought that was an interesting suggestion, so I said, "Okay" and called Sarah Lawrence and said, "I'm not coming back."

## Chapter 05 – 7:30

### Married

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**John Erling:** Okay. We've got some ground to cover here. First of all, what was his name?

**Penny Williams:** His name was Joe Williams.

**JE:** Had you known him early on in your life? How did you get connected with Joe Williams?

**PW:** Yes. I had known him from Camden, South Carolina where we both grew up. He grew up part-time in Tulsa, and part-time in South Carolina. So had I, grown up in South Carolina. Then I would go east in the summers, back to my New York family. So, we were both back and forth quite a bit. We knew each other. He was just older. Like, five years older.

**JE:** So then one year at Sarah Lawrence, did you have a connection then to him?

**PW:** Yes. I started seeing him...I think this all started going to a dove hunt. As I said, my mother became a great hunter. We were going to a dove hunt down in Manning, South Carolina. Joe gave me a ride, and we got to know each other in the car, just talking. Went dove hunting together, and then...actually the Christmas vacation. He and a friend were driving back to Yale in his car. I got a ride back with them. I don't remember the circumstances, why we did this...but they dropped me off at Sarah Lawrence College. I do remember hearing on the radio at that time, about this fire at Mont Fume Blanc in I think Vermont. My boyfriend, at the time, was in this fire. I heard about it on the radio driving with these two guys from Yale...from South Carolina to Bronxville, New York. They were really comforting and wonderful. I just started seeing Joe a lot after that. That would have been '56.

**JE:** So then you're in Wyoming. Of course, you're back and forth, and he's at Fort Sill.

**PW:** Yes.

**JE:** Then it comes to the point, as you alluded to earlier, that he said, "Why go back to college?"

**PW:** He didn't quite say it that way. "Why don't we just go ahead and get married." Something like that—yeah. I called him from at the college, and he said, "Oh gosh. Sorry to say it, but I'm not coming back." I got married in November instead of going back to Sarah Lawrence.

**JE:** That would have been in 1956.

**PW:** Right.

**JE:** Then, Joe is in the army.

**PW:** Yes.

**JE:** This would have been in the '50s. Why was he in the army?

**PW:** He had gone to ROTC at Yale. He'd gone through ROTC so he started as a lieutenant. We moved immediately from South Carolina. That Christmas we moved to Fort Sill and had our first house, a duplex with a formaldehyde couch. I remember the sofa that was parrot green. We moved to Fort Sill and did have a parrot, as a matter of fact. And, we had a puppy that Joe had given me...a Boykin Spaniel for Christmas. We started out our married life with a parrot and a puppy. Plus, we had no bird dog. My stepfather gave us. Joe didn't approve at all.

**JE:** He didn't approve of what?

**PW:** Of having the bird dog called Lightning.

**JE:** For you to move to Fort Sill was this kind of a culture shock for you to go to a military base and live out there?

**PW:** Yes. Yes, it really was. Except, you know, when you're first married, you're just totally focused on...

**JE:** How old were you when you married?

**PW:** Nineteen.

**JE:** And Joe was five years older, so he was twenty-four?

**PW:** Yes. Right.

**JE:** So, yes, you just accept that's the way life is, right?

**PW:** Oh, yes. It was very exciting for me. I got to know people there in the military.

I will never forget when we took pity on some young friends of ours...it must have been the following Thanksgiving. I cooked a turkey. When we sat down for dinner and had the turkey, there was something odd about the taste. We then realized that I had cooked the turkey with the little sack inside the turkey. The rest of my time at Fort Sill, I would get these little care packages of canned goods. People helping out. This poor lieutenant had a wife who couldn't cook very well. Then I learned to cook eventually, and just really loved it. That and gardening became my favorite things now that I'm an old person.

**JE:** Here you are, nineteen years old. What do you do with your time?

**PW:** I did learn to cook.

**JE:** When did you have your first child?

**PW:** Fifty-seven was the birth of our first child. I would have been 20, actually, right?

**JE:** Yes. In 1957, you would have been 20 years old. And that child's name was?

**PW:** Joe. Original. He was born overseas because by then, the military had sent us over to Germany. He was born in the army hospital in Frankfurt. We were stationed in Hanau.

**JE:** How long did you live in Germany?

**PW:** Two years.

**JE:** What kind of experience was that for you?

**PW:** It was especially wonderful at first because they didn't have housing for us on the caserne, so we lived in the village of Hanau. The Sidkeys were our landlords. They were very persnickety about the sounds of closing cabinets. They had sponges on everything and we were really not allowed to peep after nine at night. But, it was great living. We got to speak a little German and got to know the place much better than we would have if we had gone straight to the military.

**JE:** You traveled, probably, then beyond Germany and that whole area?

**PW:** Yes. We did. Especially in Austria and Switzerland. I had learned to ski in New Mexico earlier that year, still when Joe was in the army. So, we did a lot of skiing. It was great until I was just too pregnant to see the tips of my skis.

**JE:** Speaking of traveling, from Fort Sill, did you ever drive to the eastern part of Oklahoma?

**PW:** I did. We went up there from Fort Sill. We came to Tulsa...I guess January. It could have been February, but it was definitely in the winter. I thought this was the ugliest place I ever saw. Frozen beige the whole way. That grass was beige, the roads were beige, everything was just cold and beige. Then we got to Tulsa and there were Evergreens and

trees. The Wichitas were beautiful. So at both ends of the pole we had good country. But I just thought it was so ugly in between. That all changed when I lived in here right and I thought Oklahoma, all of a sudden, became very beautiful. And, my aesthetic changed. I started thinking simple lines, big sky were the most beautiful things on Earth.

**JE:** So that was about January, February of 1957 then?

**PW:** Yes.

**JE:** You made that drive over here. And then, of course, you had been introduced to the Williams family a while ago.

**PW:** Yes. I was quite struck by John and all the Williams. They were striking people. But, when we came back to America in the end of '59, we drove to Tulsa again because John had invited us to come out. At that time, he talked to Joe about joining the company. So, eventually, Joe decided to go to work for the company.

## Chapter 06 – 3:40

### Joe & John Williams

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**John Erling:** John Williams and Joe Williams are well known in Oklahoma. John and Joe are actually cousins.

**Penny Williams:** Yes. When I say the Williams', John and Charlie Williams were brothers and David Williams, the third Williams brother, was actually Joe's brother. The three of them lived here, David only part of the time, and Joe's father had never wanted him to go into the company. He wanted him to have a renaissance future of some kind or another.

**JE:** Joe's father's name was,

**PW:** David Williams.

**JE:** What was John and Charles' father's name?

**PW:** Charles Pettigrew Williams.

**JE:** John and Joe as cousins, have they been back and forth, as youngsters, growing up together?

**PW:** No, not at all.

**JE:** This was kind of an introduction to John, when Joe and you came to Tulsa, particularly in '59, when John asked Joe to join the company.

**PW:** Yes.

**JE:** Was that something he immediately embraced, or was that something that he had to think about a while?

**PW:** Had to think about it, because he wasn't headed in that direction at all. He might have been headed to law school, or some other realm. He even thought of staying in the army, staying in the military.

**JE:** What was his degree from Yale?

**PW:** His degree in Yale was in American Studies, history degree.

**JE:** Do you recall what it was that John wanted to Joe to do? What was his job there at Williams at first?

**PW:** Just to learn the ropes, to do a little bit of everything. Work on pipelines, which Joe did. The pipelines had us living in Tennessee and Kentucky, then we came back to Tulsa.

**JE:** Then you lived here in Tulsa, for how long before you then moved on?

**PW:** Two years.

**JE:** Probably '59, '60.

**PW:** '59 through '61.

**JE:** Did you have any more children then, by that time?

**PW:** Yes, we had one more.

**JE:** What was his name?

**PW:** Our second son, his name was Peter Baldwin Williams, so we used my father's name.

**JE:** You got to know Tulsa then, for a few years.

**PW:** Oh yeah.

**JE:** Enjoyed it here, I'm sure.

**PW:** Oh, very much so. Lived on 37th Street.

**JE:** You were raising children then, did you get involved in the community at any rate? You were probably busy being a mother then.

**PW:** Pretty busy being a mother, and so didn't get active in any kind of volunteer work at that time. Really was focused on having children, and then our third son, became due in '61, but Joe was called to go to Iran, in the international business. The third son was Jamie Williams, James Chestnut Williams. He was born the end of December. We had been living separately that year because Joe lived in Iran most of the time and I lived with my parents and Joe's father in North Carolina.

**JE:** You had been in Tulsa, but when he went to Iran then you went to South Carolina.

**PW:** Yeah, and to New York where my parents went in the summer and so then I came back to Tulsa in the fall. Joe came home in time for our third baby's birth, and then went right back to Iran again. The baby and the other children and I followed.

**JE:** What was the Williams company's mission in Iran?

**PW:** They were building pipelines at that time they were working with the Corps of Engineers over there.

**JE:** Here you go to Iran and where in Iran did you live?

**PW:** I went originally to Tehran, for three months, so I took the children for the summer. We lived in, rented a place in Tehran. Then we ended up staying six years. I ended up making a life there; we raised our children there.

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## Chapter 07 – 10:35

### Iran

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**John Erling:** Let's talk a little bit about that and your time there. Would you come back and forth to the United States, say in a years' time?

**Penny Williams:** Maybe twice...

**JE:** Oh really?

**PW:** In that time yeah.

**JE:** In that time—from '61 to '69 you lived in Iran?

**PW:** Totally.

**JE:** And took on that culture?

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** Was that tough for you to do?

**PW:** No, no. That's young in our married lives and it was fascinating. It was really interesting and it was very easy. There were people who helped you for nothing practically. I mean, just pathetic when you think about the wages in those days. You couldn't buy things. Books were the only thing you could buy without horrific duty. You paid so many import taxes on toys. We just didn't buy toys, but the labor was just incredible, the help that we got at the house we rented. We had people who lived on the property and they helped us with the children, they helped us with the cooking. They helped us with everything. It was a very easy life. I learned to speak Persian and went to school on the side there because I had the help to be able to leave my children and go to school for a few hours a week.

**JE:** Learning Persian?

**PW:** Mmhmm (affirmative) learning Persian and a little bit about Islam.

**JE:** Not keeping track of the children, but they would begin their education.

**PW:** That's right. They started at Persian kindergarten. Then the oldest two sons actually eventually went to British school. Then the youngest one was in Persian kindergarten. I also got to teach a little bit in a girl's school.

**JE:** What did you teach?

**PW:** English.

**JE:** You said you lived in Tehran for that summer. Did you settle down in another town?

**PW:** No, but we settled down further up in the mountains, up in the hills. We lived above Caceres, which is a square that left an indelible memory with me because you would see military generals walking around the square buying bread and fresh green walnuts and incredible wears and food. It was like an open-air bazaar every Saturday. It would be something like our fresh market here on Saturday. The whole square was this way. There would be young people sitting around on the hoods of cars ogling the girls. It was just a real scene and the smells were incredible. They had these ovens that were right there off the square where you could smell this great bread baking, and fried fruit skins in the sun. They also had a smell of their own, especially the apricot. I remember that. Lavashak I think it was called, and then this different kinds of Persian bread. All baked on stones and on bricks, just wonderful smells.

**JE:** Did you ever get homesick for the United States?

**PW:** No. No I really didn't. The last time I got homesick I think was when I was at Saint Catherine's and I got homesick for home, but I was so interested in where we were.

**JE:** The boys were learning Persian too then?

**PW:** Oh yeah. They couldn't help it. They had to of necessity, easier for them.

**JE:** Is that a difficult language to learn?

**PW:** Not that hard. There's one operative verb and you can put almost anything with it and make it happen. Conan...codan...and you just say...You know I'm want to go to the drugstore. Drugstore me conan. Going to the drugstore. You put anything with that verb and it works. It's a beautiful sounding language. It's to my ear much more beautiful than Arabic, which is so full of these short guttural sounds. And Persian is a more flowing language and it's got some of that softness of the Russian language. Zhenya some names that are Russian. And some of the words like the word for drinking glass is the same as it is in Russian, istikan. There are just a lot of lovely words and I haven't spoken it since.

**JE:** You mean the time you...

**PW:** One time language for me.

**JE:** From the time you left Iran, that was it? Well there aren't too many people around here who...

**PW:** No not a lot of Persians speak it. Every now and then I'll get a cab driver or something.

**JE:** Oh really?

**PW:** The only thing I can remember to say is, "Everything I ever knew in Persian I've forgotten."

**JE:** Politically in Iran in the '60's, the Shah Iran...You probably did follow all of that because we come to a name here that we're all now very well-known with, but with American support the Shah was modernizing the infrastructure but he also crushed all forms of any political opposition with his agency. Can you sense that? Did you feel that there?

**PW:** Oh yeah.

**JE:** Or you knew that was going on?

**PW:** Mmhmm (affirmative) Those were the days when the Shah was the Shah. It was definitely one-man rule, but he did stage what he called the White Revolution. This mainly involved land reform, which the mullahs hated, taking land away from the church. It's a very tricky thing to do, and giving it to people in the hinterlands. It brought radios to the far reaches of the villages in the country and brought rights for women, accentuated the arts. Was really a time of the arts flourishing for our diva who was the queen when we were there in the '60's. She was a great patron of the arts and she made a lot of things come a live for contemporary people, moviemakers and photographers (not just, uh, painting), drama, dancing. I mean all of these things. She had a committee to advise on women, an advisory committee. It seems to me that he listened less and less to us, the Americans. As time went on he had no power of succession ready. There was no power of succession in place. There were assassination attempts on his life in the '60's but that wasn't enough. He didn't trust people. He was quite paranoid by the end of the '60's when we left. Of course, he wasn't overthrown for another 10 years in '79. You could feel the signs of a building resentment because he was getting ready for the coronation to crown himself Shahanshah. There was a very expensive plan for arts that was going to be constructed. Everyone was taxed for the construction, paying for the art. Even the people who sold pencils and oranges out in the street; everyone was taxed. They resented it. The people who worked with us, they talked to us about how much resentment there was.

**JE:** Then a name that became world renown was Ayatollah Khomeini. Later on, the whole world became acquainted with. He became a critic of that White Revolution that you talked about.

**PW:** Absolutely.

**JE:** He was very publicly denouncing the government of the Shah. You remember all that tension that went on there?

**PW:** Yeah and I remember he was exiled living in Paris. He even lived in Iraq at one time.

**JE:** He was also sent to Turkey. He was first sent to Turkey.

**PW:** Yeah. He sounded like a very pro-democracy mullah. If people had read what he had written, they would have known he had designed on turning the government into a fundamentalist Islamic government, but people didn't read. We didn't read. I even questioned how well the CIA even listened because the two people I knew who were said to be CIA couldn't even speak Persian as well as I could. I think that's why some people thought, well I might be CIA because I did learn to speak the language at the time. I don't know how you eavesdrop if you don't fluently speak the language.

**JE:** Was there that question about neighbors or whatever? You didn't know for sure what their lot in life was and why they were there?

**PW:** Yeah. They would get reported to Savak, even the girls in the schools. Savak were the Secret Police. That was The Shah's right arm. I will say that he was very tolerant of Israel, very tolerant of the Jewish community living in Iran, tolerant of Bahá'ís and other people who were not always tolerated in other countries. Armenians, various people who were totally respected in Iran. That wasn't part of the White Revolution necessarily. I think that was just part of their psyche. They've always been, far as I know, tolerant people.

**JE:** With the Williams Company there, they built the first pipeline from the Gulf to Russia with other companies helping. The Shah or the government, did they ever interfere with the Williams Companies and what their work was or did they have problems there?

**PW:** No. I think they were fairly praising. I think they saw them not as NIOC, which was seen to be more British because the British controlled oil in the Middle East until Mousavi took over. He was the Prime Minister in the '50's. He took over and actually nationalized the oil industry. Then the British cutback largely, but it nonetheless was a national Iranian oil company NIOC. The British were always resented more than we were because they had a past. We really didn't have a past. Now, we brought The Shah back from Switzerland and he was kind of reluctant about that, but we brought him back when they claimed order was needed and they couldn't deal with Mousavi. The British were really behind that, we were the front people on that, but the history of resentment with England went back hundreds of years. Not hundreds but maybe a hundred.

## Chapter 08 – 6:50

### Tulsa

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**John Erling:** We stated that you were in Iran from '61 to '69. The work was completed at the Williams Companies.

**Penny Williams:** '68.

**JE:** That's when you came back to Tulsa.

**PW:** Right.

**JE:** You took up life here. Where did live?

**PW:** We first lived at the Mayo Hotel, because I had written to get the children into a school, mid-year here. January, when we had no idea where we'd be living, so, at the time, we got them into Holland Hall, I came back here and established residence in the Mayo Hotel

and, and they went to school in their British Uniforms and children here didn't know what to make of them because they showed up in little red knee socks and grey flannel shorts and grey sweaters, looking very proper, like little English boys. They didn't know what to do with Joe, so they elected him class president. He was enough of an anomaly and they had a very close race for class president going, so they thought, "Well, the easiest thing is to just vote for the new boy." So they elected him class president.

**JE:** What class?

**PW:** He would have been in the fourth grade.

**JE:** OK. How long did they wear their uniforms, not very long?

**PW:** No. Two days, long enough for me to go shopping, because we came back, right that day. I had to put them in something. We came straight back from Iran.

**JE:** Joe came back with you then, at that time?

**PW:** Actually, now that I think of it, he stayed in South Carolina, because he was sick at the time, but he came shortly afterwards. He had a terrible flu bug. Yes, we came back to America together, and then he had a stopover at home, in South Carolina.

**JE:** You then, eventually bought a house, of course, here.

**PW:** We did on 34th Street. We had owned one earlier on 37th, but that was small.

**JE:** Then, '68, '69, you're beginning to feel, "I want to get involved in my community."

**PW:** That was day one. The minute I got back, I really had been living overseas for six years and not able to be involved in anything exciting going on in America. A lot that was really interesting, gripping was going on here, so I read the newspaper the day I came, and saw that Amos T. Hall had been elected the NAACP president, so I called him up. He was in the phone book. I called up his law office, and said I'd read where he'd just been made the president and I'd love to come, be involved in Tulsa, and get some advice from him on how I could help. That's how I met Don Ross and Shirley Scoggins, and Billy Roundtree and Bobby Eaton, and Bernard McIntyre, and Judy, all of those people I started working with on voter registration.

**JE:** That was a great phone call then you made, then to Amos T. Hall, wasn't it?

**PW:** It was a great call, yes. He was the best. I really liked him so much and he did eventually introduce me to all those people. I went to work for the League of Women Voters, eventually. But before that I had worked for Nelson Rockefeller for President, and found out how unpopular he was in Oklahoma. I thought, "Oh, he's good moderate Republican." But he was thought of as far left here, in Tulsa.

**JE:** That would have been in '68.

**PW:** That was '68.

**JE:** Rockefeller eventually lost to Richard Nixon.

**PW:** Oh, did he ever! Yes, we got one delegate from Oklahoma.

**JE:** Nelson Rockefeller represented more of what you were used to, perhaps as a Republican back east.

**PW:** Yeah, totally different.

**JE:** Now we're 2012, and Oklahoma is known as very, very conservative.

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** Even at that time, it was displaying its conservative side.

**PW:** Yeah, the party was becoming more to the right at that time, little did I know. But it was, even though Henry Bellmon was very moderate, the party was growing in the other direction.

**JE:** Right. Did you ever meet Nelson Rockefeller?

**PW:** Yes.

**JE:** Tell us about that.

**PW:** That was just, hello, goodbye. His brother was a friend of my stepfather's and I shouldn't say I met him, because we never talked.

**JE:** You saw him though.

**PW:** Yeah, in New York.

**JE:** That was in your family, as you were growing up.

**PW:** Yes, because of my stepfather. He worked for Nelson Rockefeller in New York.

**JE:** On Wall Street.

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** That was kind of a no brainer; here you were in Oklahoma to support Nelson Rockefeller.

**PW:** Yeah, and it wasn't just because he was someone I'd met. Maybe the fact that my stepfather was working for him had more to do with it than I thought at the time, I just thought he seemed to be the most reasonable. I met Richard Nixon a number of times. When you're American living in Iran, you meet all the Americans who come through and I had met him more than once, and was worried about him, and thought Nelson Rockefeller was a more reasonable possibility.

**JE:** What kind of a meeting did you have with Richard Nixon? Could you visit Americans?

**PW:** Yeah, it was at the Embassy, we'd go to the American Embassy for a reception.

**JE:** He would speak to the groups there, then?

**PW:** Yeah, and he didn't give speeches, but he just talked a lot.

I must say, I've been so shocked by the tapes. I never would have expected him to sound like that in private, the way he sounded on the tapes.

**JE:** You're talking about the Watergate Tapes.

**PW:** The Watergate Tapes, yeah. Totally shocking, because he just had some anti-Communist views, that he was quite explicit about, vociferous on when he talked to all of us there at the Embassy, informally. But to actually have that kind of invective against individual people.

**JE:** Why was he there?

**PW:** He was running for President. He was acquainting himself—

**JE:** Because he had been Vice President under Dwight Eisenhower.

**PW:** Mmm-hmm. (affirmative), yes. Then Kennedy defeated Nixon in 1960. Kennedy was assassinated in '63, and then Nixon was running for President in '68.

**JE:** Right. He may not have announced then that he was running for President, in Iran, because that would have been four years—

**PW:** No, but we all knew.

**JE:** That he'd eventually be doing that.

**PW:** Yeah, we all knew that he was going on a listening tour of the world and he did, he was very interested in foreign policy and fairly knowledgeable. People in Iran were just caught up with foreign policy and quite anti Lyndon Johnson, quite anti what was becoming our policy to be so strongly, so heavily in Vietnam.

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## Chapter 09 – 6:25

### Politically Involved

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**John Erling:** Also, in '68, that was a big year. The assassination.

**Penny Williams:** That was a horrible year. It was the consequential year.

**JE:** Of Martin Luther King.

**PW:** Of Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy.

**JE:** What kind of effect did that have on you, in that year?

**PW:** It was just appalling. I think the first thing that I noticed on television...we hadn't had television or air conditioning, or anything like that, in Iran, so I come back to Tulsa and it's totally comfortable. I remember thinking, 'Tulsa should not be this comfortable! Should it? Can it?' And it was. Everything was made for our comfort. We had televisions in the hotel room. Of course, I had the television on all the time.

With the children, watching this television set, looking into this box, we see a four-star general in the street of Saigon shoot this guy point-blank in the head and heart. It's the kind of thing you don't want your children to see. That began my year of watching horrible things on television. I hadn't seen television ever since the Nixon-Kennedy debate—I think, was the last time I'd looked at a television set. To come home to this was pretty shocking. The year certainly took its toll. I personally registered as a Democrat because I knew there wasn't anything I could do to help in the Republican Party, because they didn't need my help. They were going another direction.

**JE:** Would that have been in '68 that you registered?

**PW:** Yeah, '68.

**JE:** Was that anything dramatic on your part, or your family's part, that you might of...?

**PW:** No.

**JE:** Had Joe been a Republican?

**PW:** Joe had been a Republican. All my family is Republican. Always have been.

**JE:** What did Joe think of you changing registration?

**PW:** I think he was very tolerant. He and I would argue quite a bit about Vietnam. I think he was really terrific about letting me go my own way.

**JE:** He remained a Republican, then.

**PW:** Oh, yeah.

**JE:** Your involvement then with Nelson Rockefeller was maybe one campaign, but you really got involved in 1970 in District 1, and James R. Jones for Congress. That was your first 'getting involved' campaign as a Democrat.

**PW:** Yep, it was. Actually, the Joneses were friends of both of ours. Joe is a moderate Republican, you know. He wasn't exactly where his party was. A good Republican, but not where the rest of the party seemed to be going.

**JE:** Was Joe in support of Congressman Jones in 1970?

**PW:** Yeah, I'm sure he was.

**JE:** Page Belcher was the opponent then. That was a pretty aggressive campaign. What did you do?

**PW:** I did yard signs. I did a lot of door knocking, so I got to know campaigning right off. It was interesting. The closer I came to the Joneses' house, the more I felt, 'oh my gosh, we've got to have some yard side for Jim in his own neighborhood!' Jim was never offended by things that happened in politics, the way his wife was. I think these things are always harder on the person who's married to someone. When she had Page Belcher signs sprouting up in her neighborhood, that was not something we needed to let stand-alone. We needed to get some other 'Jim Jones'. I had a big focus on their immediate neighborhood. Mostly what I did was just knocking on doors.

**JE:** Jim was defeated in that contest in 1970.

**PW:** Yes. He learned from everything we did. Any mistakes we made, he learned from them. John Bumgarner was there churning the statistics, precinct by precinct, street by street, doing a real analysis of exactly what was going on. It was considered to be a swing district, even though it was Republican. It was considered that he lived in the swing part of town.

**JE:** He?

**PW:** Jim Jones...The part that could easily go Democrat: sometimes went Democrat, sometimes went Republican.

**JE:** What area of town was that?

**PW:** They lived right on 21st, and maybe Madison? On 21st Street. John lived in that area, too, or he lived closer to the Utica Square area. Just in talking to neighbors, you realized that many people can go either way. They want us to work things out. People want problems resolved, and they don't want to hear about them again, and again, and again, like a broken record.

**JE:** It was a pretty heady thing for Jim Jones to take on Page Belcher who had been incumbent, and been there for many, many years. Jim would have been in his early 30s, I suppose, when he ran in 1970.

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** Then, in '72, Jim Jones runs again. He wins that election. You're involved in that, too?

**PW:** Yes. It was nice to be involved in a winning election! They did a real analysis of the district, so that he spent more time in swing areas, the parts of town that could go Democrat, instead of down South, in the Republican precincts.

**JE:** We'll skip ahead to 1976. Now Senator Inhofe ran for that first congressional district in 1976. And in the primary, Senator Inhofe defeated then-State Senator Frank Keating...

**PW:** Ah, yes.

**JE:** And Mary Warner. Quite handily, he defeated Frank Keating by 67% to 25%. Then, in the general election, now-Senator Inhofe lost to James R. Jones by 54% to 45%. As we know, these men have gone on to do what they do. It's interesting to look at where they were in 1976. Congressman Jones then served 14 years, and then in '86, he ran against Senator Don Nickles, and lost that race.

**PW:** That's the history. I'd forgotten which time Jim Inhofe had run against Jim Jones. He never ran against him for Senate, then.

**JE:** No.

**PW:** That was Don Nickles. That was the year I was elected. 1980. And Ronald Regan.

## Chapter 10 — 5:25

### Race Relations

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**John Erling:** Tell me as you called the NAACP and that time period, what were the race relations in Tulsa? By that time we were past separate restrooms and that type of thing.

**Penny Williams:** Yes.

**JE:** The Civil Rights Act had happened in '64, but still?

**PW:** We were past all that. We didn't have a real fair housing law, yet but we had the restaurant and the accommodation laws on the books. Jim Hewgley was mayor and so

there was some tension at that time. I remember Clayton Vaughn was with Channel Six then and I remember some of the other reporters, Bob Mosier maybe. Was there a Bob Brown?

**JE:** Went on to ABC, right?

**PW:** Yes, they were very interested in covering north Tulsa; because, in those days it was a totally segregated town still. Jim Hewgley was very sensitive to the tricky issues between north and south Tulsa. He was quite on the lookout for things he could do to make the atmosphere more reasonable.

**JE:** In '74 you were part of a subcommittee on school integration. Tell us how that came about and what you were doing in your activity there?

**PW:** I was working the League of Women Voters initially on voter registration, so I'd worked in north Tulsa a lot. I was part of this education committee and Sue Slotstik chaired the education committee, asked me to form a special committee on school integration; because we, the League of Women Voters had the notion that integration could be done better in Tulsa than it had been in Oklahoma City with the forced bussing and the rulings in Oklahoma City. We didn't want that to happen here and thought the voluntary approach could work. A number of us as parents got together and talked about a magnet school approach. We would be willing to bus our own children to north Tulsa as long as there was some innovation in how education were approached. Then we started what was known as the Magnet School Plan and we the League presented that plan to the school board. We spent a few months developing the plan. Took it to the school board and eventually it was implemented and Burroughs became the first magnet school.

**JE:** That was Burroughs Elementary?

**PW:** Burroughs Elementary. They had open classrooms and individually paced learning that involved mastery at one level before you went on to the next, especially in math where you had to master division before you got into fractions.

**JE:** Let's go back to the first day then of this voluntary busing. How did that come off? Was there some resistance to this? Some parents said no, we're not going to send our children I suppose.

**PW:** Enough said they would allow their children to be bussed that warranted getting some buses and we were among those parents. We would take Jamie and some other friends in the neighborhood. It was all by word of mouth. We would take them to, in our case to Eliot School down on Peoria and 35th and the bus would meet them there, so this whole pack of children would come from one segment of the city or another and get on the bus to north Tulsa. Eventually when this took hold the bus stopped by our street corner. At that time Lewis and 34th Street, we had about eight children who got on the bus at that corner. They were just all over Tulsa.

**JE:** How many children do you think then were bused to Burroughs Elementary?

**PW:** I would guess something like 25 to a class. There were big classes in those days, multiply that by the school, so a few hundred.

**JE:** When Jamie comes home does he talk about a good experience? Was this fun?

**PW:** Yes. I don't have horror stories. I know Peter who was not involved in this told me once that Jamie had told him about an incident of this or that. It was just hearsay. The memory does nice things for people. It doesn't always remember the bad things. I don't remember the bad things.

**JE:** I mean it's good. Here was the voluntary mixing of races and it turned out to be a good experience.

**PW:** Yes and so; therefore, maybe two years later Carver was born so you had Carver as an integrated magnet school and then eventually you had Booker T. Washington. Eventually the magnet school idea took hold. There was enough of an improvement and innovation or effective change in education to make people not care where the school was. They would do anything to get their children there. The waiting list started to build very early.

**JE:** We can say here in 2012, Booker T. Washington stands as a beacon on the hill in education, in the country.

**PW:** One of the top high schools in the country.

**JE:** It's got to make you feel good and other parents like you that know that you were in the ground floor of that whole idea.

**PW:** Jabar Shumate reminds me from time to time that I spoke to his graduating class from Booker T. Washington.

**JE:** Jabar now is a representative running for the senate at this time and here maybe you inspired him as you spoke to his high school class.

**PW:** I don't know about that.

**JE:** He's a very good representative.

## Chapter 11 – 3:10

### First Female

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**John Erling:** Also in this time period, we had a good friend of yours who became the finance commissioner of Tulsa.

**Penny Williams:** That was an important campaign, Norma Eagleton's campaign, all us "good ole gals," as they called us, I think we were called that, or "battle axes." We all signed up for Norma's campaigns, especially that first one was really quit a specter, because that seat had never been held by a woman, in fact, no voting position on the city commission had

ever been held by a woman. I think we had an accountant once, who had been auditor, but not as a voting position.

**JE:** This was in the mid '70's, now we're talking about.

**PW:** Yeah, and so we all joined forces and people who are no longer with us, Nobel Manion and Mary Cherry and Estelle Hamilton, famous League of Women Voters names, probably famous only to the league members would all join Norma's campaign.

**JE:** Who was she running against, do you recall?

**PW:** He was young, gorgeous, Republican male. Everything you would want to see in a man. Conventionally good looking and he never stopped smiling. I remember Norma just being decimated, because he would come glowing out of some event. She said, "He knows something we don't know, what'll we do?" And we'd all go, "Oh my gosh, he must know he's winning, there must be some secret poll or something." Anyway, he really did a great job, but Norma won fairly handily.

**JE:** She became the first voting female elected in our city.

**PW:** Yeah, and in fact, she was later appointed to serve as corporation commissioner by George Nye and she was the first woman ever elected to a statewide position in Oklahoma. People don't know that. But, she was a trail blazer for all of us.

**JE:** First, state wide, as a result of the corporation commissioner position.

**PW:** Mmm-hmm. (affirmative)

**JE:** First female.

**PW:** First female elected because, then one of the conditions of his asking her to serve was that she agreed to run for election when the seat came up.

**JE:** For students and all, listening to this now, it's good for them to hear that there was a time that we had Governor George Nye select a female to be appointed was pretty advanced thinking, I guess.

**PW:** Very progressive thing to do. Then later, I believe he appointed the first female Justice of the Supreme Court.

**JE:** You and Norma have gone on to become very good friends, haven't you?

**PW:** We were good friends before. We met each other at a Eugene McCarthy picnic in Woodward Park. And Don Ross introduced us. That was in 1968 and we've been fast friends ever since.

**JE:** Eugene McCarthy was out of Minnesota and he was running for President.

**PW:** This was after the Bobby Kennedy assassination.

**JE:** And he was very much anti the Vietnam War.

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** That attracted you and others like you to be a part of his picnic and campaign.

**PW:** Right.

**Chapter 12 – 6:38****Equal Rights Amendment**

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**John Erling:** In here, you're named to the Equal Rights Amendment Committee. Let's follow you there. Who named you to that committee?

**Penny Williams:** Henry Bellmon originally asked me to server on that committee. He and David Boren were honorary co-chairs of the committee. I think there were seven or eight, four members statewide, Edna Mae Phelps, and Dorothy Stanislaus from Bartlesville, Edna Mae from Central Oklahoma. She was a famous democratic committeewoman and Dorothy was Republican committeewoman. Anyway, they headed up the leadership and they asked me to be on this committee. I didn't even know what the Equal Rights Amendment was, not embarrassed to admit but some 27 words long and just gives a woman equal standing with a man when she walks into a court of law. That sounded pretty simple to me and I was for it. Of course Henry and Shirley had three daughters. They very much were behind their girls having equal opportunities.

**JE:** What kind of activities would you engage in to support that? What did you do as a committee person?

**PW:** We started the statewide coalition and we met in Stroud, Oklahoma. We fanned out beyond just meeting over in a cubbyhole of an office in Oklahoma City. We actually started a statewide coalition. It was made up of individuals like Holly Childs and Harriet Guthrie were the two powerhouses from Bartlesville and their husbands' work for Phillip's Petroleum. They would drive to Stroud from Bartlesville and other people came and were not on there as individuals but represented the president of BPW, Business and Professional Women—she was on there naturally because of her position and League of Women Voters and American Association of University Women. Farm women, Wanda Peltier was on there and she had suffered a great tax loss because of her husband dying and they thought the farm was under joint tenancy but no, she had to pay inheritance tax, et cetera, et cetera. There were woman from all over the state. So we'd meet there and decide how to get these men, how to get the votes of 50 plus one men in the House of Representatives. Plus we have a hundred House members. We also formed a committee in Tulsa and a lot of business people at the time were supportive of our having the Equal Rights Amendment. We would have been the state if we had passed it in Oklahoma, we would have been the state to put us over the top. We needed one more state. Just enough states had voted for it. We just needed one more state to make the 27th Amendment and we failed.

**JE:** How close?

**PW:** We were a few votes off because the Speaker of the House, Dan Draper decided that the Senate should be the one to start the Equal Rights Amendment. Marvin York was President of the Senate. I think this was in '78. Dan Draper thought he could pass it but the Senate couldn't do it. He didn't want his numbers to be exposed to being on record for an issue that had become controversial.

When I said I'd be on the state committee, I thought it would be a snap. David Boren and Henry Bellmon co-chairing the committee? Come on. So, it wasn't any snap at all. There was a lot of resistance to it. And we found out, the big lie works because if you tell lies about something enough, you can actually prevail. Those were seen...

**JE:** What lies were being held?

**PW:** People were told that women would be drafted immediately. That was the worst one. To give women equal standing in the court of law was not to draft women. You saw how long that took and it didn't need the Equal Rights Amendment to do it and we never did draft women—we never have—but now they're part of the selective service pool for volunteering.

**JE:** The lie about drafting women was probably one of the key reasons they would like to defeat?

**PW:** I think so, yeah. And we would be forced to use the same restroom. Remember we had four restrooms in the train station in South Carolina? We'd have one and it would be for men and women equally.

**JE:** That was another lie that was out there.

**PW:** Definitely, yeah. There were number of lies, one that was actually 27 words, 27 words to the 27th Amendment. A woman would never need this until she walk into a court of law and then she should have equal legal rights and she can't help that she's born a woman, right? It just seemed absurd that we would even have a law against her having equal rights in a court of law. At any rate, not only did we find out that the lie worked. We found out that that was just the beginning and the day we lost the Equal Rights Amendment—I remember the lead opponent when I was being interviewed on television shifting her stance every time I turn my head so I would have to look right into her eyes and she never went away. We went away. We folded our card file. We closed our office. We all went back to our lives and our children and our crab grass in the lawn and whatever it is we were doing. Eagle Forum did not. In those days, we had card files. They started building their card file. They only built from there and look where we are now. They won. And, I will have to say that Phyllis Schlafly is the great winner in all of this because she knew better than to fold up the tent. She just built up the card file or whatever the high tech term is now for storing names in a computer and expanding and expanding.

**JE:** This is going to be hard to believe for students listening back on this that that kind of culture existed in our country in the '70s.

**PW:** Oh, very much. Yeah.

**JE:** Opposing women's equal rights.

**PW:** Look, now even contraception has become an issue.

**JE:** Right.

**PW:** That was at least a fight that was won in the '70s, that preventing unwanted births would be part of a teenager's education and how to prevent...

## Chapter 13 – 8:40

### Penny Elected

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**John Erling:** Well here your education as an activist, leads to 1980. What does 1980 mean to you?

**Penny Williams:** Well 1980 is the year of Reagan. I remember campaigning with Don Nickles running for senate and Reagan running for president, and I ran for the legislature. Working for the Equal Rights Amendment I had become close to my own representative, who was republican. That was Paul Brunton, representative Paul Brunton. He had told me when he was not going to run for reelection, he said, "Hey, you ought to run for my seat." Which I took as a joke. Then little by little I began thinking about, you know, "I really should do this." I remember finally Smith saying, "It's better to work on an issue from here, where the door locks from the inside, then coming at us from Tulsa. Why don't you just try and get yourself elected?" So, I didn't alone, but thanks to a lot of friends we did win the seat.

**JE:** Your opponent was?

**PW:** Jerry Lysinger was his name.

**JE:** What was the district number?

**PW:** District 70, at that time.

**JE:** Name some of those people that were on your team?

**PW:** I had...a lot of the people I'd worked on the Equal Rights Amendment with; Katie Westby, Mary Athens, Norma Eagleton, Patty Eaton, and Mary Cherry...a lot of the people I've worked in The League of Women Voters with. Don Ross gave me my first fundraiser in north Tulsa.

**JE:** Don Ross?

**PW:** We'd had Mable Rice. She was a great friend of Katie Westby. In fact, Katie had introduced me to her when she did the Black Art's Festival for the North side. Mable's still alive and she was just a fantastic help. She also worked in the campaigns of Maxine Horner and Don Ross when they subsequently ran for legislature.

**JE:** Rodger Randall, would he have been...

**PW:** Rodger was the prime motivator. He originally talked to me about running. He was in the senate holding the senate seat. Sorry, I forgot to mention, Senate District 33. We met over at Gene Pace's house in their kitchen. In Fran and Gene's kitchen I had a cabinet. I recall the brain trust, Rodger Randall, Mandell Matheson, Gene Pace and Darvin L. Brown. He was attorney for the city for a good while. Brownie we called him. He was my guru. I don't think he ever said a sentence without it being rye. Every word out of his mouth was rye. He is probably the person with the best sense of humor I've ever known.

**JE:** Well you had quite a cabinet then to...

**PW:** It was incredible. Then we ended up...my back went out on me. I think I was so stressed at the thought of running. You know it's funny, men, when you ask them to run they say, "Oh sure, good idea, yeah I'll do it." Well, it took me months and I remember even having this back that went out on me and my doctor put me in the hospital and said we shouldn't do an operation, we should do traction. So we tried that for all these days, and that's what we ended up doing. My back surgeon ended up saving my back, Norman Dunitz. It was such a noble thing to do. At home, I moved downstairs so I didn't have to climb stairs. We had the first meeting earlier in Gene Pace's kitchen. We started meeting in my dining room where I had my bed.

**JE:** So the campaign gets kicked off and you can't really participate?

**PW:** I can't knock doors at the time but I'll be darned if I didn't get better pretty quickly. Just by being still.

**JE:** This was not then about how much money you could raise, but how many friends you could have.

**PW:** Really. Totally. Really people didn't know me from anyone, with a small exception of people who lived right in my neighborhood. They knew who I was but nobody of these thousands of people knew who I was with 30,000 people to a House District in those days. They just talked about me. Friends talked about me and wrote postcards and made phone calls and knocked on doors, and vouched for me that I was a hard worker and that I would push to get something done, especially for education. I believe really that the greatest thing wrong with Oklahoma has to do with our culture and that it's a low sense of possibility, that we think we really can't be any better. It would cost money anyway so we sure don't want to invest in ourselves.

**JE:** You were sold as a supporter of education. Wasn't that going to be your mantra when you would be elected?

**PW:** That was my issue. Strengthening education, not just being for it but making some progress and making it more effective.

**JE:** This District, is that balanced 50/50 Republican-Democrat?

- PW:** Well in those days, it was called a Republican District when it turned 40% Republican. This District had always been Republican whatever the registration was, but they even called some Democrat Districts Republican Districts. Certainly this one and then House District 71, which is the next District over, which a Democrat had just won in a special election. Totally that is a Republican District and so is this.
- JE:** Here you were coming along as a Democrat. Was that against you? It was tough then probably.
- PW:** Oh yeah, it was tough as a Democrat but I think other people vouching for me is what transcended the limitation.
- JE:** Right, so despite the facts, we'll hold out nose she's a Democrat, she's a strong proponent of education.
- PW:** Yeah because some people don't care about Democrat/Republican. They care about getting something done, getting things improved.
- JE:** Right, so you won that election. Was that by a big margin do you recall?
- PW:** It was probably pretty big. I didn't realize at that time, but they called it a landslide and I don't remember what it was.
- JE:** In 1980, females were making a mark?
- PW:** Guess what? When I was elected in 1980 to the Oklahoma House of Representatives, there were five women who represented Tulsa County alone.
- JE:** Let's name them.
- PW:** Twyla Mason Gray, Helen Arnold, Alene Baker, Joan Hastings and I were the five.
- JE:** On top of that, Norma Eagleton is the Corporation Commissioner?
- PW:** Right. First elected woman to statewide office in Oklahoma.
- JE:** Right, the men had to be nervous that the women were taking over?
- PW:** I don't think so. There were only five of us.
- JE:** But, that was still notable. That had never happened before.
- PW:** Oh incredible. Compared to today, never happened before and it never happened again.
- JE:** When you then worked inside the building where the doors can be locked, as we referred to earlier. What was your committee assignment?
- PW:** I first was put on the Education Committee, which was the important one to me. I was even given a sub-committee to chair, amazingly enough for freshman, and that was a committee on quality and standards. Steve Lewis always used to kid me because I would talk about quality and he said, "Quality! Excellence! What is that, what are you talking about, what does that mean?" Before we left the legislature he knew because he was the author of 1017 Education Reform Bill that had the money to invest in the improvements, education attached to it. That was in 1990, ten years later.
- JE:** Let's talk about a couple of issues here that you were involved in, and then we should point out, how many years did you serve as our elected official from District 70?

**PW:** For eight years and then in 1988 I ran for the Senate because Rodger Randall left to become Mayor of Tulsa.

**JE:** Then you served a total of how many years?

**PW:** Twenty-four years.

**JE:** That set a record?

**PW:** That did.

**JE:** First female to serve 24 years, and something that will never be broken again?

**PW:** Yes, that is a record.

**JE:** As long as we have...

**PW:** As long as we have term limit.

**JE:** Little did you know, in 1980 when you started that campaign it would last that long.

**PW:** Little did I know.

## Chapter 14 – 9:00

### U.C.A.T.

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**John Erling:** Let's look back. Some issues that might have been interesting that are still important today, like establishing higher education in Tulsa.

**Penny Williams:** That was my number one issue. When I ran...

**JE:** Known as UCAT, University center.

**PW:** University Center at Tulsa.

**JE:** At Tulsa.

**PW:** UCAT

**JE:** Tell us a little bit about that.

**PW:** Let's see. How many bills did I loose? Rodger Randell was the Senator author because he was Pro Temp of the Senate, so it was easy for him. He was going to get whatever he want, but Dan Draper was his counterpart, Speaker of the House, and they were not about to give us free standing public higher education in Tulsa. They just wanted us to pay for everyone else's.

**JE:** In this town, Tulsa was actually the largest community in Oklahoma without public four-year higher education program.

**PW:** The largest metropolitan area in the whole United States without publicly supported higher education, above junior college.

**JE:** Why was there a fight then, when we were the only one? Why there be a fight for sending funds over here?

**PW:** Because there was limited money, and we were much more interested even in those days in tax cuts than we were in investing in our selves. It was amazing. You could see the difference in, even level of degrees, in Tulsa. It was just like a donut hole with no center in Tulsa, and the other colleges around Oklahoma. You know there were 27 colleges in Oklahoma. There was opposition from within, and I didn't know anything about politics until I got into higher ed politics, and there are no politics like those politics. Very, very mean spirited, very self-serving, self-aggrandizing, you know, just tough politics. I was this naïve little freshman, little did I know what I was up against, all the colleges. And then the worst thing on the old college council, we had under E.T. Dunlap, we had 27 votes. Of course, even if OU and OSU had one accepting, they were outnumbered by 25 other colleges. They're our research universities, our flagship universities, but they don't count. That's the kind of culture we were up against in those days when we were trying to make improvements to education. It wasn't just on the common ed front. It was also on a big time, on the higher ed front, and they were very resentful, even someone as smart as Cleta Deatherage. She represented OU, and she couldn't afford to be seen counting the flag for Tulsa. Dan Draper, the Speaker of the House of Representatives of Stillwater, the former Speaker of the House was Bill Willis from Tahlequah. He represented Northeastern; they couldn't afford to be for Tulsa. They just wanted us to send the money down for the higher ed budget. So, guess what happened? Twyla Mason Gray used to read. She would read the House journal, which has the summary of everything that happened. You know, it's very boring, just all the little votes that are taken, committees, what happens in committee when something's on its way to the floor, blah, blah, blah. Well, she noticed that the Higher Ed Appropriation Bill had not been appropriately voted out of the Appropriations Committee by the full committee. So she called a point-of-order when we were passing the Higher Ed Appropriation in 1972, she called a point-of-order, and this is close to end of session. Called a point-of-order, and pointed out from the House journal, where this omission had occurred. So we had to do a separate vote on the emergency. You know we passed the Higher Ed Appropriations with flying colors. But then we voted on the emergency, and we scuttled around and tried to get friends to help us vote "No" on the emergency, and we did, by one vote, we stopped the emergency from passing. The legislature just went bananas, and we didn't know what to do. We were bumping into each other, and I remember Twila and I, Alene Baker, our other female freshman, bumping into each other as we were getting out of the chamber, and running to offices, and Bob Hopkins, who was the only person in the Tulsa delegation who had a real position of authority, which was Chairman of Transportation, had an office with a table in it, the rest of us just had little desks, but he actually had a meeting table. We met around this table for

the last weeks of session, and we couldn't decide what to do, and what would be the compromise, and how we would get something through to have Tulsa included. So the regents had done a study and we had some choices. They gave us models, and one of the models was a consortium model, or we could become Tulsa University, and I've lost at least two bills trying to make us Tulsa State University. Those had gone down in Higher Ed Committee earlier in the session. I didn't know any better but I called meetings of the Tulsa delegation, and all these important people came, all the Senators and House members, because I didn't know you weren't supposed to do that, only the dean of the delegation should have called meetings. But I was a freshman, what did I know? So Ida Smith, Rodger, and Charlie Ford, and Bill Poulus, and all the old characters came, and we finally decided that a consortium might be the way to compromise because we thought Bill Willis so objected a branch of OSU. We thought Dan Draper objected to our having a branch of Northeastern. We thought. So we thought maybe a consortium was the way to go. But the way the back finally was broken on this hold out, we all hold up in Bob's office for these days at least, it might have been two weeks. Jim Forrester, who was a Republican in the legislature at that time, said he thought it was about time to take a bottle of whiskey around to Dan Draper, and just talk turkey. Maybe it was a bottle of Wild Turkey, I don't know. So he went to see Dan Draper, and he came back, he said, "Done. You got a consortium."

**JE:** What colleges were apart of this consortium?

**PW:** The two flagship universities would offer courses there, OU and OSU, and Northeastern and Langston. Those were the four colleges. And Rodger and I had gone out to Denver, and seen how the campus consortium at Auraria worked. My son was also in the college that was one of five colleges back east, with the University of Massachusetts. So we had seen the consortiums could work, with different colleges awarding different degrees, in their appropriate subjects. Our dream was to contract out for other courses from Oxford, Cambridge, who knows where, but if we needed them, if we had gaps and needed other courses, then we could contract for those. But that was years later that we got our own budget that we were put in charge of our budget. Initially we just got the bill, the right to exist, and an appropriation. So we started out as the University Center at Tulsa, UCAT, and then later, many years later, we decided that we could become our university, just by dent of moving Rogers State College to Tulsa, and let it be the administrative head of the consortium. We did, and it was, but we had trouble even there, because we couldn't contract out, and that was the ambition we want to do. Then eventually we became OSU.

**JE:** So today, it stands that OSU is very much on their own, developed a huge program here, and so is Oklahoma University. Both of them are stand alone...

**PW:** Yes, at the graduate level. But OSU has the undergraduate level. They're in charge of the undergraduate now. We're no longer a consortium.

**JE:** But what's happening today had to all take place for what you just explained.

**PW:** That's right. By our holding up Higher Ed Appropriations. We said, "We want to be part of it too! We'll pass your emergency clause," which is a two-thirds vote. You have to have two-thirds of the legislatures present.

## Chapter 15 – 3:50

### Legislative Highlights

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**John Erling:** As you look back on your career in the legislature, what are some of your proudest moments that you participated in?

**Penny Williams:** Thank you. What a nice question. Thanks John. I would say oddly enough the things I feel good about are property tax reform because I finally got Bill Willis, the former speaker of the house, to relent on not letting me raise the household exemption amount. It was down to 7,500 income to even get a double homestead exemption. That started a wave of...they finally let me have those bills, so I got four or five bills that made incremental progress on getting the income level up whereby people became except for project tax. So they were not priced out of their house by taxes. On the economic development front, the laws like the Brownfields Legislation attracting business to blighted areas that were called Brownfields and the tax increment finance to attract businesses to come and build where there were either blighted areas or vacant lots and used the tax to pay for physical improvements for the infrastructure along with the city attracting them. They would give the city the power to offer tax increment finances. T-I-F they are called. Those bills have fostered a lot of development for downtown Tulsa. Don McCorkle started that with me when he was in the house along with the Quality Jobs Act that he and Ted Fisher did. Then when I went to the senate, Russ Roach also became my house author because Don left and that was the worst day in the legislature for me. The day that Don McCorkle left because he was really the most creative person I ever worked with. He was brilliant. He was not popular. He was a reformer. He did a lot of nursing home reform and things that made the old guard furious but he made a lot of progress. The nursing home reform bills were some of mine I was proudest of. So I look back on those and the Only Childhood Bill, the bill that automatically made education for four year olds is part of the formula, the school funding formula which Joe Ed started over in the house. That was one of my best bills ever because it really allowed

us to become number one in something. Early childhood development because we had the standards for teachers and that was unpopular. They didn't want those standards. People in other programs didn't want those standards for teachers of four year olds and also the funding that was guaranteed and also didn't carry with it a mandate. The waited funding for the four year olds is purely if parents want their children to have early education, the schools have to provide it contract with another school to provide it or a church. Anyone else who will provide education for four year olds whose parents wanted. So that was a great bill.

**JE:** Another piece of legislation that you're proud of.

**PW:** The one I did the very least work on. I didn't have to lift to think. Maxine Horner did it all and that was the Jazz Hall of Fame. That was a wonderful bill. That has brought so many good things to Tulsa.

**JE:** Was that easy funding? Nothing is easy I guess, but...

**PW:** Yeah nothing is easy, but they had really worked on that bill. There was a Republican legislature from Bartlesville who co-authored it with me. He helped to make it easy too.

## Chapter 16 – 17:00

### House Bill 1017

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**Penny Williams:** That leads me to 1017, which is probably the legislation I'm proudest of. My main part in that was to put in a core curriculum, which we'd never had. I would say, the early childhood bill leads me to remember what I love best about House Bill 1017—not just the fact that it had the money in it to invest in improvements to education, strengthening education, but also the fact that it left so much work to be done. There was such a large agenda, big picture, that every one of the sections, or almost every one of the sections, begged to be improved. My particular part in 1017 was the definition of the core curriculum and defining what any person should know and be able to do if he or she were interested in going to college. Establishing that core was the most important thing to me, and it had six basic subjects, not just math and science. Included the arts and our culture, history...

**John Erling:** And math.

**PW:** And math. Definitely had math and science and English, but it also had history and geography and the arts. There were six disciplines mentioned in the bill so that we would know who we are as a people. We would know our history and the history of the United States, and world history and geography, and where we are in the world and the global

economy. It was an overarching definition of the core and we had never had that. At any rate, each section of 1017 was different from the other. The section that was the most glaring in need of improvement was the alternative certification for teachers. That's the one Don McCorkle and I took on as a priority the following year, after 1017 passed in 1990. Don and I then went after the preparation of teachers because certifying teachers and the certification of teachers made us look at how are they prepared in the first place, and why couldn't David Boren or Robert Henry or any other really well educated person step into the classroom and help us out, and help students out and give them a sense of history. They couldn't because they weren't certified to teach. We came up with doorways into certification as a notion, so that alternative certification could cover life experience. If you had a law degree instead of a teacher's degree, you still could be deemed qualified to teach. How can we attract these people instead of screening them out and forbidding them to set foot in a classroom? We found out that what we did in the bill—and we only did it for math, science, and foreign language teachers: the shortage areas—made it even more bureaucratic for them to comply and come into the teaching field than the existing law. We worked with really a three-year project to really strengthen certification to revamp the education hours for a teacher. In the first place, we said a teacher had to have more than one year of English to be qualified to teach. The standards were very low for getting into education. We revamped those and tightened them; you didn't even have to have more than one hour of math to be a math teacher in an elementary school—more later. That's just one example of what we did in each section of the bill. It was a really big picture, big thinking, far-reaching bill. Henry Bellmon, Republican, was Governor. Steve Lewis, Democrat, Speaker of the House. Bob Cullison, Democrat, President Pro Tem. We met and met and met and Steve Lewis passed it in the House just by taking out a few things; they took out a big section on punishment—they stripped it of that. Years later, Bruce Nemej came back and worked on that, but they took out some things to pass it easily in the House from the original report. I should say that the original report was some of the best work done in Oklahoma. We had a Task Force 2000 that Henry Bellmon and the Speaker, and the President of the Senate had to agree on the membership of the chairman. Everyone, all two branches, three entities, put people on the task force, none of whom could be a legislator. The Governor, the Speaker, and the President had to agree on a chairman. They agreed on George Singer from Tulsa. George Singer and his task force wrote the most wonderful report; it is really a well-worded report. The gist of it was outcome: let us look at outcomes instead of focusing on all these rules and regs. You know how the education law book is that thick. We're going to look at how well students were doing. How are they coming through the system? How are they doing on the way in and how ready were they for life after school? Were they

ready for college? Were they ready for the world of work? Were they ready for the world of citizenship and voting? Not very. I would call them the readiness issues. The whole perspective of the legislation was the readiness issues. Were seventh graders ready for the eighth grade? Could they do that level of work? Usually no was the answer. We were lagging at every level. It isn't just that we were number 50 or 49 in funding for education. We were lagging in standards and how well our students were doing. Better than what we paid for, for sure. At any rate, by the time we finished with 1017, we had all these chunks to work on. It gave us a menu for the future.

**JE:** Well, the reform, as I have here, and the sections reforms directly relating to student performance, performance relating to the compensation and training of teachers. We might point out that in '92 and '93, a teacher's beginning salary was 20,460 dollars and today it is a starting salary now of \$29,174; an average salary is of \$38,772, which can go higher. That shows you the jump from '92 to 2012.

**PW:** Oh, I'm so glad you have those exact numbers.

**JE:** That's over a 10-year period. That was jump-started by House Bill 1017, reforms relating to accountability in structured schools and funding issues. That's the overall structure of 1017.

**PW:** That's good. I really appreciate that overview. Those are the four points of the compass. The issue I started to talk about was alternative certification; that was one of accountability. The certification, we just thought there should be more than one way to get help for students. If teachers have only had one year of math or science, and we have a scientist who's ready to come in from an oil company or a gas company, or any other company, and give his or her expertise, we'll take advantage of them, if in other ways they're good communicators, love kids, and want to help out in the elementary schools. We carved out a few exceptions and created substitute teacher standards. We just did some things to strengthen the teacher preparation. That's just one example; early childhood was another where we strengthened that.

**JE:** When we look at House Bill 1017 laying such a foundation for what we have today, just something very basic is pointing out here is that requiring school board members to have a high school diploma or a GED. It's almost embarrassing to think that in the '90s, early '90s, that had to be a point of the reform.

**PW:** Oh, definitely. Kara Gae Wilson, at the time—Kara Gae Neal now—had recommended herself out of a job. She was a county superintendent when she served on this task force and she recommended that office be abolished.

**JE:** She did, right.

**PW:** She became abolished, and she was just a great resource. We need something in a county with a school district as large as Tulsa's, which was 40,000 students. We need an

overall coordinator, or it's helpful to have one, and I think that she's been acting in that capacity in many ways for many years as a catalyst.

**JE:** There are many points to this House Bill 1017 that we haven't gotten into. Some of them seem so obvious that you'd want to be working on them. There was opposition to House Bill 1017. As I recall, five legislators here from the Tulsa area were holdouts on this. Why were they?

**PW:** That really had to do with one of our senators being the next minority leader, because one of Tulsa's senators was going to be thwarted in that ambition by the Oklahoma City group if they didn't oppose this bill. This was the Republican Party really ganging up against Henry, their Republican Governor, so it was a nasty in-fight. They were just trying to keep it from passing.

**JE:** Why were these Republicans so opposed to 1017?

**PW:** Philosophically, I could probably say they were against the money to pay for it. They're for education but they're against the money to pay for it, and that's often the case with people who say they're for education, but then they're not for doing anything to pay for it. They believe in a free lunch, I guess. At any rate, there was this group of five senators who were pledged to one of their number as being the next minority leader-

**JE:** Who was that?

**PW:** ...because that Senate was controlled by Democrats.

**JE:** Who was that person?

**PW:** That would have been Charlie Ford—Charles Ford. He was the dean of our delegation; he was the longest serving Senator from Tulsa. He had been in the House and was then in the Senate. Also, there was something going on that was some kind of personal situation in Norman, Moore, and Oklahoma City, with Henry Bellmon and the Republican Party—and I'm not sure what that was. I really don't know but I know those two issues sort of combined to present a united front against 1017 from the Republican Party. They didn't make it happen because Olin Branstetter from Ponca City broke ranks with them; he didn't care about who was the next minority leader. He was there to serve people and do the best for children, and by darn it he was going to vote for it and work on it. He worked with us every step of the way on that. It wasn't just the funding that made it controversial; it was also the early childhood provision. The far right called it a nanny bill, or nanny land. We were going to nanny...Remember what I said about the big lie works? They kept saying that we parents would be forced to send our children to four-year-old programs. No, it was purely voluntary, but people believed in this nanny state that was created by the far right. It was purely a figment of their imagination: nowhere in the bill and nowhere in subsequent bills. This group of senators were not successful in blocking the bill, so in spite of their anti-education or anti-Henry Bellmon stand, the bill passed by one vote.

It passed because of a bill we had on sales tax paid on food. If we would exempt poor people up to whatever the poverty rate was—and it changed every year—they would get a rebate. I think the average was 50 dollars a year that the poorest person in Oklahoma would pay for a years worth of food, so that person could apply and get a rebate. We've had that in the law ever since 1017 passed because we subtracted it from the total. We had a mixed tax base to fund the bill—a little income tax, a little corporate, a little sales, a little this, a little that. It was supposed to be a broad based tax. We subtracted that by 20,000 dollars the first year because the bill brought in about 240 million and then we subtracted 20 to give what was projected to be the rebate on food. The last lone Democrat, and they flipped a coin to see who would be the one who would get to switch votes and be a yes vote instead a of a no vote, and that's how we got our last vote.

**JE:** On a flip of a coin?

**PW:** Mhmm.

**JE:** Truly?

**PW:** Mhmm.

**JE:** Who flipped the coins?

**PW:** I don't know, maybe it was Vicki Miles-LaGrange; she's the one who prayed over us. She's now a judge; she was Senator LaGrange. Maybe she's the one who flipped the coin. Four of them were ready to vote for it. They all had the same reason: they didn't want to vote for it because of poor people in their district, and they were from the poorest Senate districts in the state. Larry Dickerson, who's now deceased, was also part of that group who didn't want to vote for the bill because of poverty in his area. Butch Hooper of Lawton—there were others who were using that same reason not to vote for it. The person who won the coin toss was Senator Frank Shurdon from Henryetta.

**JE:** To the great credit of Governor Bellmon, who, probably, as we've gone through this, could just brand him the 1017 Governor—he was.

**PW:** Was to me.

**JE:** He would not back down from this even in the fight of his own party. Didn't care; he knew how important all this reform was.

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** Did he personally offer encouragement to you people?

**PW:** In a way, I want to say it wasn't his problem; it was our problem in the Senate. In another way, of course, he was there all the way being very bullheaded, I will say. Various members said, "Okay, if we can't do it this week let's call it off. It's taking up the whole session." Then we had teachers marching around the capitol in the rain saying, "Please pass this bill," and other people for it, including Republicans outside the legislature backing Henry Bellmon on it. It was a tough bill but I think the thing that made it

controversial most of all was the fact that it had money in it. We had that sequestered; we had it put in a separate fund like a lock box. Unfortunately, the lock box's money went down just the way all the other state money went down whenever there was a cut, so there was nothing that made it exempt. We had a lot of other parts of that bill, some of which involved contracts with teachers. Even now, they grapple with this thing that grew out of 1017, which was paying teachers for extra work. Another thing we did at the elementary school level was an amendment that Herb Rozell from Tahlequah put in, which was the amendment to require teacher assistant for all those teachers in grades with poverty-level children. There were just so many parts of the bill that were helpful to better education and more attention to individual students, and small class sizes. Part of the philosophy was to take the cap off teacher salaries but that's never been done. We still have the cap but we have additional reasons for teachers to get money for performance. That was one of those bills that grew out of 1017 that called for national board certification. That's like a contract; you can't abrogate that. Once you have entered into a contract with a teacher, that is something you're bound to do.

## Chapter 17 – 6:55

### Split Personality

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**Penny Williams:** Another bill that is almost as important to me, which was not my bill, was the bill to allow for children under a certain income to get free college tuition if they comply with a precollege core curriculum, pretty much the one we laid out in 1017, and stay off drugs, stay out of trouble, and get good grades above 3.5%, that kind of thing. That bill, at the time, was called the Taylor Plan. Maxine Horner was our senate author. It went through various iterations, but it's now called Oklahoma's Promise. Parents in the state and the local school district all have to sign off on this, as well as the student going to school, pre-high school. They sign up for it in the ninth or tenth grades, or now I'm hoping eighth grade because it had to do with the readiness issue of getting readier for the next grade, so that's a really important part of the bill. I don't know what shape these things are in now. When I was in the legislature for 24 years, we believed in, I thought I was part of building a state. We're a very young state, and I thought it was such a privilege to be part of building this new state and making it better, getting us out of the bottom-five states. That was Henry Bellmon's goal. On teacher salaries alone, he wanted to get us out of the bottom-five states, but on most human issues, we were really in the bottom 10, if not the bottom five, and we're better than that. We are better than that, and I'm

very sorry to witness the deconstruction that is occurring right now, like disinvesting in ourselves, giving ourselves back money so education won't have it. It doesn't seem morally right.

**John Erling:** Even the suggestion to cut out our income tax.

**PW:** Especially that. I mean, to me, that's just un-American. This is who we are. We pay dues. We believe in membership. My years in the Middle East taught me we are the luckiest country on earth. We are so lucky to be American, and I feel so lucky to be Oklahoman. I'm here by choice, not of necessity. My children have all grown and gone. I just love this state. It's just a crazy, wacky, weird, lovable state.

We're a split-personality state. There's part of us that is destructive and too quick to react, too quick on the trigger. That's part of us. That's who we are, too, but we're also this great state that has learned to live better with the people we found when we came here. I mean, there has been some progress made. The tribes are a part of this culture in the best of ways, and I just think it's a unique state.

**JE:** Do you think that the best times for you were when you served, or would you like to be serving today?

**PW:** I wouldn't like to be serving today because I don't think I could be effective. The only way I was effective even when I was there was by pushing and sometimes swimming against the current. I think they ran when they saw me coming down the hall because they knew, those I worked with, that I just was working on one other facet of 1017 that we needed to strengthen, make better. I just had this great sense of privilege being there and having traveled enough to have seen other things and other places that I knew we could do better because I'd seen better, and I've learned from other states' problems. We would go to conferences. Bob Cullison used to joke, "Well, let her go to the conference, but make sure she doesn't get to the meetings." Don't learn anything new, and it'll make sense, and then we can't pay for it. But it's just that higher level of possibilities.

**JE:** Yeah.

**PW:** Some people know we've got that in our blood stream as a state, and we do. We have that level of aspiration, but I just think we've lost sight of the big picture.

**JE:** Education should be such a no-brainer.

**PW:** Oh.

**JE:** Do you ever think to yourself, "Why isn't everybody thinking the way I'm thinking? Doesn't everybody else get it, and who could argue with that?"

**PW:** It's funny. People do.

**JE:** Yeah.

**PW:** But I don't think they necessarily do. I think if they're not given to imagine something more or if they've never seen anything else, there's a lot of ignorance in the land.

Oklahoma is no exception. Some of it's willed ignorance. We choose not to know these things.

**JE:** I want to ask you, as we conclude, I've often wondered what bill this was. My wife, Margaret, is a lobbyist. You and Margaret lived together in Oklahoma City for several years. From time to time, you would find yourselves on opposite sides of an issue.

**PW:** (Laughs). Yes.

**JE:** One time Stratton Taylor had you carry a piece of legislation, which Margaret totally opposed.

**PW:** Aha.

**JE:** Nothing was ever discussed between the two of you...

**PW:** I wonder what that was.

**JE:** ...as you lived in this apartment about this bill.

**PW:** (Laughs). Yeah. Yeah.

**JE:** As Margaret tells it, on the night of its defeat, Margaret was out later, and she tiptoed into the apartment...

**PW:** (Laughs). Oh, yes.

**JE:** ...hoping that you were already asleep, but as she passed your closed bedroom door, you yell out, "You killed my bill."

**PW:** (Laughs). That sounds like me. That's right.

**JE:** Do you remember what bill that was?

**PW:** I think it was the bill to set up this teacher preparation assessment commission to find a better way of dealing with teacher assessment. It lost by one vote because there were only four of us present. It was in a committee where there were two votes on one side and two on the other, and you've got to have three on the other side.

**JE:** It seems obvious to me that somebody should be on your side, and why Margaret was opposing you is beyond me, but we'll have to take that up at another time.

**PW:** I think it was because she thought it would have created too large a bureaucracy, and I was scared of that, too, but we would have worked on the bill. I'm a process person. I always think that bills can be worked on and improved. Then we don't pass them if we don't like them.

## Chapter 18 – 19:37

### Two Accidents

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**John Erling:** I want to talk to you about an accident that you had. It was during session in 1997, I believe in March, when you were heading home, right?

**Penny Williams:** Right.

**JE:** And so tell us what happened.

**PW:** Out of the east, came a Mack truck across the broad expanse of Lincoln Boulevard. I had not seen him coming, but then all of a sudden, he was crossing my lane, and I put on the brakes. There were a number of cars, but there was no lane to avoid the Mack truck in.

**JE:** This is an 18 wheeler right?

**PW:** Yeah, an 18 wheeler, I should have said. Yeah, and I just went right up under the Mack truck and that was the last I knew. I mean when I woke up, there were the jaws of life, and people asking me what year it was, and who our governor was, and what the name of the day was, did I know where I was, which state, what's my name.

**JE:** Did you...Do you remember yourself going under the truck?

**PW:** Yes. I remember. I remember thinking this is it. This is...there is no way to avoid this, there's no way to stop from sliding under this truck, and there I went.

**JE:** So you come through then...

**PW:** I come to, who knows how much later. All I know is when I got to the hospital, all I wanted to do was sleep, and they kept waking me up, and not letting me sleep. And I'll never forget that feeling—sleep was so tempting, delicious. I was driven to sleep. And so that was a test of will with the hospital staff that lasted for a day or two.

**JE:** And obviously the automobile is totally wrecked. Do you know—did the truck come over you? I mean you were trapped in your driver side...

**PW:** Yeah I was wedged into the door.

**JE:** ...airbag exposed, come around, and all that kind of thing?

**PW:** Oh yeah.

**JE:** So what are the injuries to you?

**PW:** I just think it's my head, I just think they were...I think they were to my head. It's—it's good to have an excuse, you can blame a concussion on that loses you your memory, but I haven't totally lost it. But things will come back; it's like rebuilding a memory for 20 years.

**JE:** Oh, so that's true, you really have had to...you're done rebuilding now, but...

**PW:** I don't know if I'm done. I mean there are things that I forget every day, and then there are things that come back to me every day. So it's an odd dance.

**JE:** But early on, a year or so after the accident, there was very definitely things that you were missing?

**PW:** Later, it took me...I think it took a few years to realize it.

**JE:** Oh you didn't know it?

**PW:** I didn't know it immediately, and maybe it happened overtime. But there definitely was that displacement in the brain. I was—I was conked for a long time.

**JE:** Conked out for a long time meaning...?

**PW:** In unconscious.

**JE:** Under the truck?

**PW:** Mhmm.

**JE:** So hours or how long? You don't know?

**PW:** I'd have to go back to the court case, because, you know, the insurance company sued over it and etc., and my car was totaled, etc.

**JE:** The driver was held responsible for this obviously?

**PW:** Yes, yup.

**JE:** Right. Did he ever come around and talk to you?

**PW:** No, and I think he may not have even been that legal of a driver. I know there was a problem with the trucking company, and I think it may have been not a reputable trucking company.

**JE:** How long were you in the hospital, before you...

**PW:** Just a few days.

**JE:** You mean there were no other injuries other than to your head?

**PW:** No.

**JE:** Broken bones, nothing?

**PW:** No, nothing, nothing formal.

**JE:** So it was all major concussion. When you hear concussion today, we hear more about that today with athletes today. You now know for sure what they're going through.

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** Alright, so how long did it take you to start coming around and going back to session?

**PW:** I would say a week. I mean I was in University Hospital for a few days, and then came home, recovered for a few days, went back into session. I didn't think anything much about it at the time. But then looking back on it, I started having memory problems, and fortunately had great staff to work with. So if I forgot something, we could all look it up, we could all go back to the record.

**JE:** Did you seek medical advice on this, "Doctor I'm missing something here?"

**PW:** No, no because it wasn't profound for a few years. And then I began to read about the brain research that was current, and thinking, "You know this sounds familiar." Especially in the 21st century when we're reading about all of this concussions and the brain damage done.

**JE:** Did any of your colleagues say...

**PW:** They were either incredibly polite and gentlemanly or they just didn't notice anything. They just thought I was always that way.

**JE:** But there were those who noticed something, you think?

**PW:** I don't know, I don't know, I know I noticed something because I couldn't remember things I'd actively been involved in. And—but it all...It start...They started coming back, memories of the past.

**JE:** You must have said to yourself, “Wow I could have been killed”...

**PW:** Mmm. Oh yeah.

**JE:** “I could have lost my life...there must be a purpose for me here on this earth.”

**PW:** I better do something fast.

**JE:** Did all those...

**PW:** Not fast enough...

**JE:** And I know all those thoughts going through your head, right?

**PW:** Yeah, and I did...I—I left the legislature feeling “Well I tried”, and I was always pushing but I never, I never got done what I thought was most important to do. In fact I think the closest we came, to ever doing something strong as a state was the Education Reform Bill, when Henry Bellmon was Governor and Steve Lewis, and Bob Cullison chaired House and Senate. They...I mean that was an incredible threesome. They had the leadership to finally pass this Education Reform Bill, and put in place a real reform effort, and then when it was objected to by private citizens up two or three filed a petition against it. And so we had to fight the battle all over again, this time we fought to keep it, we did a Vote No Campaign, and prevailed. And I think it may be the only state that’s had a public vote on tax moneys spent to invest in children’s future and their success. As far as I know no other state has done this. So it’s a pretty proud claim for 1990, which is the year it passed in. I think of everything I did at the legislator. That was close, as close as I ever got, just being part of that larger vision part of that larger tough effort to what I had dreamed about being possible.

**JE:** So the citizens finally did...

**PW:** The citizens!

**JE:** The citizen voted, right.

**PW:** They voted.

**JE:** Made the right decision.

**PW:** So it wasn’t like, no I think I said to you before, I thought the University Center at Tulsa, which is now OSU, was our most important act. But, in a way you can look down the long road, and say, “Well that was inevitable.” It was too outrageous that we didn’t have publicly supported higher education in Tulsa. That was going to happen, this education reform was not going to happen, but for the efforts of these PTA people. And supporters of education, and not directly the teachers, or the administrators as much as the outside forces: the community forces, the Chambers of Commerce, the individuals, the people who cared about the progress of the state, and wanted to see it go somewhere. And wanted to be seen as competitive with other states and the internationally connected, and conversant. It was great, it was a great time, but of course there was descent.

**JE:** Of course, of course right...

**PW:** But it was, I think looking back on it all, it was a high point for coming closest to being part of something really significant.

**JE:** Yeah, well you were close to and part of a lot of good significant things. But then there was another accident that took place, and this was a fire.

**PW:** This was something that woke me up in the slowest of ways, and it was in February of 2000. I had come back for the turnpike for a Chamber of Commerce meeting on education. And we had...we were meeting in this auditorium, I think it was in Jenks. I come home to bed and just crashed after a hard week, I remember being really tired, crashed to sleep. I just remember my two cats, they were there nearby. The dog was not. And about two in the morning, I woke up, and I heard this clash of like a garbage can lid being crashed down on top of garbage can. You know that sound?

**JE:** Mhm.

**PW:** And I thought, "Oh how strange." And then I finally got up, and I could smell this really wonderful scent of wood burning. You know, that makes you feel so comfortable and want to go right back to sleep. But I thought this is strange that I'm hearing this clatter and I picked up the phone to see if I could call 911 because when I heard the clatter, I thought... and I thought I saw someone down below in my neighbor's yard. And I called 911, well the phone was dead, the phone line was dead. So that woke me up. Then I thought this line has been cut or something is going on. And then I saw this nice flames sort of flapping up through the causeway from the garage to the house. The fire had started in the garage.

**JE:** Yes, and I know you've told me this before that there was an electric heater in the bedroom over the garage and the thermostat became stuck which caused the heater to implode and it became the actual cause of the fire. So tell me then did anyone else nearby see the flames?

**PW:** The youngest boy next door on the other side had seen the flames and woke up his mother and father. And they said you know, go back to sleep it's nothing. And he said, "No, it's something." He was about two years old. And so finally, the neighborhood woke up and the trucks came and whatnot, but not until I tried to open the door of my bedroom to go down the stairwell and there was about a thousand degree heat in there. So I couldn't go out that way, and I kept saying, "Alright, it's a house fire, there's got to be adrenaline somewhere to get me to open these windows, but no adrenaline came. And so I finally open this little teeny square that was in the middle of the other windows. These were...This is an old house and there was this little square patch in the middle. I finally got that open and squeezed. And I'm overweight. You know, squeezing through that thing. My children could not believe I could get through that. But anyway, I did, and I jumped out of the second story and landed on some pots and broke feet and ankles.

**JE:** Okay, you just jumped out of the second story. We need to come back.

**PW:** I scrambled.

**JE:** As soon as you got through that opening, what were you? Standing on a deck or something?

**PW:** No, I just...There was just the window and a laurel tree that was growing there.

**JE:** And it was down, and it was down out of that window and it was down right away.

**PW:** Right. And I had just stacked the pots there earlier on a warm day. But this is February and frigid. There were these pots.

**JE:** You came through the window, could you stand up?

**PW:** No.

**JE:** So you just had to fall out of the window.

**PW:** Yeah, yeah and I did, I fell out of the window and sort of grabbed for the tree going down and it was bad having the pots there. Because I brought the pots and so the pots broke my ankle and my heel, my foot. Smithereens. You know, pot fragments. So anyway that was that.

**JE:** When you started going through that window. You knew what you were doing. You knew you're jumping, you're getting out of here.

**PW:** Oh yeah. I was bailing out.

**JE:** Right. Okay, before you went in the window. Was there a lot of thought to that or thinking about it?

**PW:** Yeah, I thought how am I going to get out here.

**JE:** Right, that you were nervous about jumping down the floor?

**PW:** I was worried. I was nervous about getting the windows open. I could not get the windows open.

**JE:** That you couldn't jump, that's what your biggest worries about.

**PW:** Yeah, that I was...

**JE:** You're already committed to jumping you just...

**PW:** Yeah. I couldn't find out how to get out.

**JE:** So the injuries you just described...your leg, your ankle, your foot.

**PW:** Yeah on my left side.

**JE:** And so those were the only, not to belittle it or anything.

**PW:** The lungs kept me in the hospital. The lungs were really damaged. And uh, I just...I had breathing tubes for a while and oxygen. So then the foot became more noticeable and I had surgery on the foot. And I remember seeing people I knew in the emergency room card or waiting for someone, you know, to come take care of me. I would walk into a constituent or a constituent would walk by. Oh hi. Susan Savage came in with the Chief of Police. She was there at three in the morning, and she was Mayor and she was there and her sparkling blue jeans and sparkling smile. That's the only thing I remember and then I would conk out. But, it was quite a weird prolonged stay in the hospital.

**JE:** Because of your lungs?

**PW:** Mhm, because of the lungs and...

**JE:** The lungs because of smoke or the way you fell?

**PW:** No, it was smoke.

**JE:** Okay.

**PW:** It was lung damage. And so I've always...I've been a little short of breath ever since. I've lived to tell about these things and I am just so fortunate to be alive. I'm so fortunate to have had the friends there who got me to the hospital and got me through this and—

**JE:** So these two accidents. Did they give you, first of all, the first one, was there a period of driving for a while when you started driving again?

**PW:** No.

**JE:** Okay. And then what about then your fear of fire thinking that this could happen again in some house to wherever you're living, did that haunt you?

**PW:** No, but I could really understand every time I picked up the newspapers, reading about how people could sleep through a fire, how they could not escape, how they could not get out. Those stories became so understandable.

**JE:** Yeah. Well here you were saved twice.

**PW:** Yes. Gosh, John. You were saying what for?

**JE:** No.

**PW:** I'm a grandmother.

**JE:** You still had work to do because these are in the 90s.

**PW:** Oh yes, this was my election year, 2000 was my last election, my last campaign. So it did affect the campaign.

**JE:** How?

**PW:** Well, my opponent attacked me for not knocking on doors.

**JE:** While you were in the hospital?

**PW:** While I was in a cast. No, after session. It was, it was just an ugly session.

**JE:** Who was your opponent?

**PW:** I lost a really good friend. I'm not even thinking of his name right this second.

**JE:** Okay, and you lost a good friend?

**PW:** I lost a good friend and I was visiting her a lot of the time out in Western Oklahoma, even though she worked in Tulsa and for Tulsa. She...Her mother lived on a ranch out in Western Oklahoma and so I kind of consider that my Western Oklahoma home. And she died of diabetes and then I was in the hospital with all this absurd stuff. It was just crazy.

**JE:** And what was her name?

**PW:** It was a sad year.

**JE:** What was her name?

**PW:** Sheryl. This was...She used to be Sheryl Benson and she was Sheryl Salman.

**JE:** Okay.

**PW:** And you knew her.

**JE:** Yeah.

**PW:** You knew Sheryl.

**JE:** Right.

**PW:** She was an extraordinary friend and extraordinary person and extraordinary friend to education.

**JE:** Yes.

**PW:** She was a big part of the Education Reform Bill. Helping...she cared about children, helping children really be successful. She was a student-focused advocate of education—that more than anything, more than any organization within education. You know, she was for the students.

**JE:** Well, you come from strong stock, don't you? You've got a resilience of their...

**PW:** I've just been amazingly lucky because I've certainly squandered any genetic heritage I got from my grandmother and my mother.

**JE:** No, no—no you—you drew on all that through these two incidents. For sure, you know you did that.

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** And then you went on and did some other great things. So the work didn't come to an end. Thank you for sharing that part of your life and that these things can be overcome. It just...I'm sure there were dark days.

**PW:** It took a lot of help from a lot of friends.

**JE:** A lot of dark days for you too, but you were able to withstand all that and here you are sitting vibrant.

**PW:** I would hardly use that adjective. That's not a nice note to end on; you're a very great interviewer. Thank you so much.

## Chapter 19 – 8:14

### In Reflection

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**John Erling:** Penny, we come to this part, where we ask, how you would like to be remembered? I'm sure many in our legislator and in the public would say that she was very tenacious, would that be accurate?

**Penny Williams:** I would say, if that means, they ran when they saw me coming.

**JE:** Correct.

**PW:** They knew, I wanted to do something else for children, for education, for larger possibilities, for having a stronger education system, if you want to call it that.

**JE:** Right, so that was a good thing?

**PW:** Yeah.

**JE:** You tell me, how you would like to be remembered?

**PW:** Fighting for children. I really was fighting, especially for opening up education to situations where children could feel and be more successful. When I think about Oklahoma and I think of the dismal statistics, number 50, number 49, 48 in expenditure per child, teacher salaries, those horrible, grim statistics. But there are these nuggets of excellence all over the state. I started thinking about, "Well, how can we make a difference when there is this amorphous lack of commitment?" The first answer to that is by taking lateral steps and stepping outside the "System" and building some little nuggets, examples of excellence. Margaret Erling did the Mayo School, as I mentioned before and we also did the Street School. We started this alternate education in Tulsa, which was the forerunner for eventually Oklahoma's commitment to alternative educations. Students who couldn't hack it in the main system, but who were given some circumstances, where dropouts and kids in trouble could go for a more appropriate reach out to them. We started Street School in Tulsa, it became a national model. It became a state model and then we did a law around it. The Vo-Tech System in Oklahoma was always said to be number one in the nation, we call it the CareerTech System now. And the Math Science School in Oklahoma City that was something we started as a model to show if you're really, really ready for college. This is the core curriculum that's going to help make you ready and conversant with the word. It wasn't just math and science that was required, it was also foreign languages and literature, English, geography, history, but it was with an emphasis in math and science because students could not get advanced classes in any of those things around Oklahoma. Finally, there was a lawsuit after we passed 1017 that had the core curriculum mandated in it. That these children had to get math and science and there was a lawsuit against us because there was not the place within commuting distance for this child to get into Rogers High School and get some advanced math classes, which he could have gotten because he wanted to go to MIT. The parents won the lawsuit, so we were in a great position to actually start a boarding school, where students, whose parents wanted them to, could actually go. That was an example. Then there is the Oklahoma Summer Arts Conference, where talented children from all over the state come and meet each other and become part of the Symphony Orchestra and they paint. In about seven or eight arts disciplines, they all learn for two weeks in the summer. There are lots of nuggets of excellence that we had. My pushing

was for creating pockets of excellence, where those who are ready and willing to do the work, could do more work.

**JE:** Have you had experience with stories as a result of some of the nuggets you talked about that it impacted a certain person's life?

**PW:** I would say lots from the School of Math and Science.

**JE:** You know of cases.

**PW:** Yes, lots of thank you notes and then so many come back and give back to the state. They come back as teachers from Harvard and Yale and MIT and other places and that continues. That is just a gift. But I don't know if people today appreciate it. It was very tough to acquire that school, to build that school. It was only thanks to Edna Manning, our one Head of the School we had, who is retiring this next year. It kept going—the board kept going. Good people around the state, not just in Oklahoma City, where it's located, have contributed to it. Yes, in that sense lots of appreciation.

**JE:** It's going to make you feel good and rewarding, so you could be remembered as the education legislator, how is that?

**PW:** That's little highfalutin.

**JE:** No, it isn't.

**PW:** I pushed for education, for just making it better, making it work for more and more kinds of students.

**JE:** Are you concerned about the state of the education today, in 2012?

**PW:** Desperately and people I know, I'll name one, she's a Russian teacher at Central. She just got her pink slip. They will not be needing Russian at Edison Preparatory School.

**JE:** Tell us why not?

**PW:** Because there is no money, so 16 teachers of languages and arts and whatnot at Edison loan will let go.

**JE:** Why is there...

**PW:** There is no money because the legislature and the governor want to give tax breaks and we don't have the money there to give these tax breaks. We're just cutting education right back to the bone and beyond. I mean, we've done all the little cutting. Now, these are big cuts, every time you cut a teacher, especially in main area of discipline that's a cut.

**JE:** Isn't that frustrating to have this, I guess, we call it an argument about education that education should be agreed upon as being the no-brainer, the foundation.

**PW:** I know.

**JE:** Why there has to be this argument and push for education, it just doesn't make sense?

**PW:** Well, especially as this is the generation, which will be paying for your and my Social Security in the future. We need these kids to grow up and be well educated, to be able to compete in the global economy and even the state economy. It gets down to

the crassest level. We need them to be educated. We don't need to disinvest in them, we don't need to deconstruct the state. That's what I think you and I both have been involved in so many ways, in so many different levels is building a state. We're such a young state and we have been involved in building the state.

**JE:** Well, students who listen to this and those who do will know the foundations, the gems that you created with others...

**PW:** Oh yeah.

**JE:** I realize, you were tenacious and all of that and they'll be grateful to you and our legislators who at the time, this would be taking us back to the era of the '70s and '80s.

**PW:** Especially the '80s, when I was there, the '70s before the '80s, when we had money and then in the '80s, we started the cutting that roller coaster ride affected us whereby we had to raise taxes. That's something we don't understand at all. In Oklahoma, for some reason, we think we get a free lunch. It's not free.

**JE:** No, it's not free. Well, I want to thank you for this time you've have spent with us, to hear your thoughts and for generations to come to hear your voice and to be remembered. You're to be thanked Penny, I appreciate it very much.

**PW:** Thank you. You're to be thanked. Thank you John.

## Chapter 20 – 0:33

### Conclusion

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**Announcer:** (music) This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com).