Interview History

Interviewer: Tanya Finchum
Transcriber: Jill Minahan
Editors: Tanya Finchum, Juliana Nykolaiszyn

The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Project Detail

The purpose of the Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project is to gather and preserve memories and historical documents of women who have served or are currently serving in the Oklahoma Legislature.

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on November 10, 2006.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Barbara Staggs is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on April 11, 2007.
Barbara Staggs – Brief Biography

Barbara Annette Masterson Staggs was born July 18, 1940 to Truman and Veleria Masterson in Hulbert, Oklahoma. She is married to Ross Staggs and they live in Muskogee, Oklahoma. They have two sons. Staggs earned a bachelor’s degree in Education from Northeastern State University, and a master’s degree in English and a doctorate in Education from the University of Tulsa. She was a teacher in Muskogee for 15 years where she taught English, drama, speech, and broadcasting. Following that, she was an assistant principal for six years and then a principal for three years. Staggs was the first woman secondary principal in Muskogee. She served as superintendent for Tahlequah public schools from 1990-1993, being the first woman to hold the position. Staggs, a democrat, was elected in District 14 to the Oklahoma House of Representatives in 1994 and served through 2006 when she was termed out. Staggs was the first female elected to the legislature from District 14 and beat a male incumbent with more than 20 years of service. A few of her accomplishments while in office include assisting in making it a felony to throw something off an overpass, helping create a commission to study the large number of women in prison, making it legal for persons with disabilities to hunt with a crossbow, and creating the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame.
My name is Tanya Finchum. I’m here today with Barbara Staggs. I am working with the OSU Library on a project entitled Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Past and Present. Barbara served in the House from 1994 to 2006. Today is April 11, 2007, and we’re at the OSU-Tulsa campus. Glad to have you here today.

Thank you for asking me.

Bring us up to date about where you are now, but start back to your place of birth, hometown, parents, siblings, that type thing.

Okay. I was born in Hulbert, [Oklahoma]. I happened to come from the generation that did have people still born at home. I was born at my grandmother’s house there and I lived in Hulbert probably about three weeks. I don’t remember those first three weeks too well. (Laughs) My mother and father were in Muskogee and they moved me to Muskogee where their home was. I have lived in Muskogee all of my life except for the short period when I was a superintendent in Tahlequah, and that was just three years.

I had a house in Tahlequah because my two sons had gone to school over there and we had bought a house for them. I lived there and then I decided—no really, my husband decided, that I was missing out on an opportunity to run for the legislature. I had decided that I wanted to run for the legislature quite some time before that, and I probably have three of the best cheerleaders in the whole state, male cheerleaders. He [husband] called and said, “Barbara, the fella who is the current representative is not gonna run, and you would probably like to have an open seat.” And so I quit my job in Tahlequah at the end of three years, telling them that I was going home to write a book, which I’m still going to do (Laughs) but I haven’t been as good at that as I should have been. I
just didn’t want to tell them that I was going to run for office until I was really sure I was going to run for office. And Muskogee Public Schools was between superintendents, and they asked me to help them out for that period of time while I was making up my mind, only they didn’t know I was making up my mind either. And I did. I worked for them from the beginning of the fiscal year for the schools in July [1993], and then I stayed until January [1994] and kept saying, “Guys you’ve got to hurry up, guys you’ve got to hurry up,” so I could start publicizing my plan to run for the House. I didn’t want to do that while I was working for Muskogee Public Schools.

I have no siblings. My parents are both dead now. My father died when he was very young, forty-four, and my mother had Alzheimer’s and died several years ago. In fact, she died my first session in the legislature. So I don’t have a family. I have very few cousins, and my husband has only a brother and a sister, so we have a very, very small family. When we’re gone, that’ll be about the end of the Mastersons and the Staggs.

_Finchum_  
Were you interested in politics during college?

_Staggs_  
No.

_Finchum_  
No inkling to do it?

_Staggs_  
No. I was interested in being a teacher. My very favorite aunt, my father’s sister—and she’s the only other one in my family still living. She’s ninety-eight right now, and I’m going to last longer than even that. I keep telling her that. Anyway, she was a wonderful teacher. In the summertime when my mother needed a break from me—I think they didn’t know what ADD [attention deficit disorder] was when I was growing up, and so she needed to have a little break from me. I would always go down and stay with them [aunt and uncle] because they had no children. And I got wonderful attention while I was with them, but I also learned a lot about teaching. She was a fantastic social studies teacher, and I decided I wanted to be a teacher.

And then I had good teachers in college and good teachers in K through 12, only no K when I was growing up. All of them made good impressions on me. I wanted to be like many of them, an attribute or two from one and an attribute or two from the other, and so I made up my mind to do that.

I was very active in educational groups like OEA [Oklahoma Education Association] and I wasn’t very active in the NEA [National Education Association]. In OEA I was active and whenever we had meetings and visited with our legislators, I decided I didn’t like the fact that we didn’t
have their attention. I’ve always been a responder to what I consider a negative threat…if you tell me I can’t do something, I’m determined to prove to you that I can. I just felt like people thought teachers would not be good legislators, and so I thought what we need to do is send more teachers to the legislature then maybe we can get something better done with the teacher retirement system, which I was not able to do at all. The entire time I was there we made only one positive change in the system.

So, when my husband said, “You need to come home if you’re gonna run for the legislature,” I came home and I got a big surprise. The incumbent decided he was going to run again, and by that time I’d already told a lot of people about my plan to run and … and they had made me feel good. They encouraged me and said, “You’d do a good job.” So by the time we got down to the filing period, it was Barbara and four males. I loved running. A young man who had run before shared some of his wisdom with me. He said, “Barbara, you will love this. You’re a people person, and you will love going door to door.” And I thought, “Door to door sounds like a breeze.” I didn’t realize that would be one of the most difficult things I did campaigning, but nevertheless it was the most fun thing.

And I’m a very visual person. I’m not an auditory person, and consequently I can tell you where just about everybody in my district lived, but I might not be able to remember the conversation that I had with them. The best thing was I could remember when I came there to their house and how much fun I had visiting with them and I knew where they lived.

**Finchum**

Did you have to do as much each time you campaigned, each time you ran?

**Staggs**

I think it’s pretty obvious I like to talk, so I don’t think I ever cut down very much. I might cut out some republicans and focus on the democrats since I’m a democrat. However, I had a lot of republicans who were supporters, too. While we have some yellow dog democrats and yellow dog republicans in Muskogee, we have a lot of moderate republicans, too, and my philosophy is pretty moderate.

I’m fiscally very conservative. My mother was German and I know how to pinch pennies, and when it’s somebody else’s pennies, I pinch even harder. So I was in line with them in lots of ways, and I had also been a republican at one time in my life. My husband’s comment when I decided that I was going to change back to Democrat was, “I’m glad you’ve finally seen the light,” because he was always a democrat. But I changed parties when I was in Tahlequah before I ever decided to run for office. I changed because the senator there, Herb Rozell said,
“Barbara you are absolutely worthless to me as a republican. I need you, and I need you to be a democrat.” I had definitely disagreed with republicans on lots of education issues. So it was not difficult for me to change, and I changed there and then I’ve been a democrat ever since.

**Finchum**

*Did you have the same campaign manager for the twelve years?*

**Staggs**

Yes, I did. I like to do a lot of things myself. It’s not that I can’t delegate. The woman who was my campaign manager was a friend who lived down the street and owned a flower business. I just asked her. I needed someone on a piece of paper to be my campaign manager, and she said, “Oh yeah,” she’d be happy to do that. So, yes, she was there the whole time. I probably did not use her as much as many candidates use theirs, but I was not an individual that had someone else running my campaign and telling me what to do. As I said a few moments ago, I’m very conservative with a dollar and I wasn’t interested in spending my money on someone to do what you ordinarily think a campaign manager does.

That first year in ’94, I probably spent in the neighborhood of twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars, and twelve years later you couldn’t begin to run a campaign on that. Most of the expense that I had was just material that I handed out to people and postage for things that I mailed to them and some advertising, and that was about it.

**Finchum**

*So your last campaign cost how much? Did you figure out the difference?*

**Staggs**

It was not a great deal different, no. I probably spent maybe thirty-five or forty thousand dollars, because few of those things had gone up. But I did not spend a lot of money on campaigns…just couldn’t do it.

**Finchum**

*Your first election you won by like seventy-five percent of the vote or something like that?*

**Staggs**

No, it was very close.

**Finchum**

*It was close?*

**Staggs**

Yes, because the incumbent, who had said he wasn’t going to run again, did run. We had to have a run-off after the primary. There was no general election opponent, no republican ran that year. They ran every year after that, but they didn’t run that year. I would say that it was more like I was in the upper fifties and he would have been in the upper forties.
Finchum: *How long had he been in office?*

Staggs: Twenty-some years.

Finchum: *And had a woman ever held the office from your district?*

Staggs: No.

Finchum: *No? So it was a major coup for a woman to beat a man that had been in that spot for quite some time...*

Staggs: But he had a reputation for not always being nice to his opponents—to being kind of tough on them. He was never that way with me. His wife was one of my best friends during the campaign and we always sat together. I don’t have any complaints about that first campaign and his decision. I had a lot of men say to me, older men of course, “Barbara, I just can’t vote for you. I just don’t think a woman ought to do those things. You know I like you and I like Ross. I just can’t vote for you.” And he [the incumbent] may have decided to run again because he didn’t want to see a woman get it. I don’t know. But I know that he was never ugly to me in any way during the campaign.

I don’t really believe I’ve ever had an opponent who has been. I think that there’s one thing that, at the local level anyway, has not really changed much in all of that time. It’s not just me. I think for a male to be really tacky to a female incites some hostility from other females. They’re going to respond positively to the female if she’s not being tacky herself, if she’s just passing it off and going on. This is business and, you know, I can go out and eat with them later.

Finchum: *How many other women were in the House your first time in?*

Staggs: I can’t tell you that. I can tell you that I looked up where Oklahoma ranked in all of the states in the country with the number of women legislators and we were dead last. The other states were not large, but we were absolutely dead last. I don’t know if that has ever changed for Oklahoma. It would be like teacher’s pay. If it moves up one, it might be a little bit higher for a year or two and then it’s back down. I think, maybe, in the House at one time we had five or six out of a hundred and one. That’s miniscule. The Senate has had proportionately a few more. They only have forty-eight people over there.

Finchum: *What do you think we need to do to get those numbers up?*

Staggs: I think we need to do lots of things. First of all, we need to convince people that women bring to the table an important ingredient in
legislation. Our presence cuts down on dirty jokes and a few things like that, that go on when there are no women there. I’ve been on boards and I’ve been in groups of superintendents and I know when there are women there, the conversation subject matter is a little different than it is when we are not there.

In addition to what I would consider the moral area of why we need to be there, I think we also bring to the table attributes that are not so common in men. It’s not that men do not like children. I know that they like children, but there are not very many men who have spent years of their lives home with their children involved in educating at home before they get to kindergarten. And there are not very many men who do the care giving roles that women do, not only with their own parents but probably with their husband’s parents as well. We just have an interest in areas that—I don’t want to say the men are not interested in, but I would say they don’t have the experience in it that we have, and I think that’s wonderful.

My issues were education, which involves not only teachers and administrators but it definitely involves kids, and that’s something women are very interested in. We’re also interested in older people—and sometimes it hits you kind of hard as you start getting there. I did not like turning sixty-five, but I also don’t like the alternative. I think we have a sincere, genuine interest and experience in older adults. It’s not that men are not good listeners. I think men are good listeners, but I think not only are women good listeners I think we understand some things to ask older people.

I think that an all-male group is minus a significant factor if they do not have women on every committee that they have in the House and in the Senate, or whatever the group may be, even if it’s not legislators. If you don’t have at least one female on it, there’s something missing. We bring attributes that are different. It’s not that they’re better. It’s simply that they’re different. And when females are the majority of the population, I think it’s a little strange for us not to be present everywhere there’s a decision-making process.

**Finchum**

*What do you think is the biggest hurdle from the woman’s point?*

**Staggs**

I’m not sure I know. I think I understand a little better after having been there, so I’ll give you two or three instances.

**Finchum**

*Okay.*

**Staggs**

If you live in the Oklahoma City area, it’s much easier for you to be in the Oklahoma legislature because you don’t have to leave your families
in order to go stay in a hotel while you’re in Oklahoma City. That’s a factor if we want women from a lot of different areas. I live in what is classified as a rural area, because Muskogee is not the size of Oklahoma City and Tulsa. I would never have considered it a rural area until I got there [State Capitol] and found out about that.

I knew we had lots of farmers but I didn’t know anything about agriculture, nothing at all. I had some good friends in my district and some good constituents who helped educate me in that area. In the western part of the state we have many more women who are active in agriculture. I want them to be sent to the legislature. I do not know all of the brand new ones, but I think they bring, even in the area of agriculture, some different attributes than the men have. I think that we need to be present on everything.

One of the funnest bills—and funnest is one of my favorite words—one of the funnest bills I ever did was a crossbow hunting bill, and everyone looked at me like I was nuts. I have to admit, I hunted when I was a kid. I’ve told you I was an only child. I think you’ve probably figured out, “Well she was probably a tomboy,” and I was. I hunted with my father and was involved with target shooting and things like that. So I had no objections to hunting or fishing or any of those things.

I had a man in my district with a very serious disability who came to me and said, “You know, I like to hunt with a bow, but I can’t hunt because I can’t stand up like you need to stand up to hunt with a regular bow.” It wasn’t legal to hunt with a crossbow. He said, “I wish you would figure out a way to help us so that we could do that if we have disabilities that keep us from being able to hunt with a regular bow.” I thought … that’s interesting. And of course I’ve always been an educator, not only for everybody else but for me, too. So I learned a lot about crossbow hunting and wildlife.

Well, I found out that I had a bunch of good friends in the wildlife section of Oklahoma. I still enjoy seeing them and finding out about the things they do like when they put trout in the streams so that we have better fishing opportunities here in Oklahoma and all kinds of things like that. They sent me a plaque and it was Legislator of the Year for the crossbow bill, and I appreciated it. I think that my concern for his disability and his inability to do something he loved to do with his son was what got me interested in it. I think women bring those attributes. We show up on pieces of legislation people wouldn’t think we would be the least bit interested in as females. We’ve got to bring females from all across the state, not just those that live in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. To go over there [Oklahoma City] for four months was probably one of the most difficult things for me. I think my husband
loved it. He didn’t have anybody making out any “honey-do” lists for him while I was away and he had his own business to take care of. I think he probably came to the legislature…well I know he came the six times when I was sworn in—but I don’t imagine he came but two or three times more than that.

Finchum

*Did you rent an apartment or...*

Staggs

Yes.

Finchum

*...a hotel room or what?*

Staggs

All of those. I lived in a bed and breakfast. Mary Easley moved into that same bed and breakfast while I was there. Then we moved to a hotel where Jeri Askins, Mary [Easley] and I lived in different rooms next to each other. We then rented an apartment and the three of us lived together. Then Mary went someplace else, I don’t remember where, but she’s still in the Senate. Then Jeri and I rented an apartment together. So I’ve lived with Jeri for twelve years and I probably lived with Mary or right next to Mary for—oh, I don’t know, maybe six or eight years of that time. We were always very good friends and enjoyed talking about bills together, too.

Finchum

*There wasn’t a living allowance so that just came out of your regular salary?*

Staggs

No. No. There was a living allowance.

Finchum

*Oh, okay.*

Staggs

You had a per diem. It took care of meals, where you were staying, and transportation back and forth from wherever you lived to Oklahoma City. The people in Oklahoma City, or the surrounding area had a mileage limit. I’m not sure what it was but it was just easier for them to go home to their families. My children, for the most part, were both grown.

Sometimes it’s tougher on a spouse than it is for the person who’s there. It’s a job. You know, you can’t be mad at somebody for the way they voted on your bill because next week you may need them to vote on something else. I was able to do that pretty good. My husband was always the kind that, “Barbara, don’t worry about it. You’re not gonna have any competition in this race.” He just kind of kept me built up a lot, and that was marvelous.

Finchum

*Can you tell me more about the day you were sworn in—feelings and*
emotions and...

Staggs

I can’t remember who the supreme court justice was who swore us in the first year. I’m going to answer your question, but I’m going all the way around the bush, as you’ve found I do.

Finchum

Okay.

Staggs

The supreme court justices come from all over the state. There was one there from Muskogee who happened to be a good friend of mine, and if he didn’t swear us in the first year, he did the second time we were elected. I have a picture showing him, the back of his head, as he’s swearing us in. Kids who live in Midwest City, Del City, Oklahoma City and even Edmond and those places, can come to visit the Capitol so much more often than our kids. One of the things I always like to tell kids, especially kids from Muskogee is, “I want you to know how many people there are who work at the Capitol who are from Muskogee.” I could point to Drew Edmonson. I could point to Hardy Summers, the chief justice of the supreme court and I could point to a guy who worked in the treasurer’s office. I could point to a lot of people who were there to encourage them and say, “There’s a place for you to work in that area if you really want to.” And then, of course, there were three of us—Ben Robinson, Bill Settle and me when I first went up there [Oklahoma City]. They were always very, very good to me. And now I said I’d get back to your question, and I’ve forgotten what it was.

Finchum

Maybe I have, too. (Laughter)

Staggs

That’s all right. (Laughter)

Finchum

Oh, your first day—what was your first day like?

Staggs

Oh, the first swearing in? You go into the legislature and you work your way up on the floor. As you are re-elected, you move up closer to the front of the chambers. The legislators sit in two groups, republicans on the right side and democrats on the left side. Jeri [Askins] and I were on the very back row, and so it was not difficult for us to point ourselves out in the picture. We were the smallest ones in it, but you could definitely point us out since we were on the back row. The gallery is just packed because everybody’s there to see their son, their daughter, their friend, their spouse sworn in.

I don’t really remember anything special about it, except it was the first time that I had to sign the pledge that said I’ll do everything I’m supposed to do. “I will abide by the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of Oklahoma. I will not take any money
for anything other than the salary that I receive for my job.” And I thought that was a good statement to have on there. That was the first time I had ever seen that, and they still have exactly the same one.

Finchum  

Do you remember your first day debating a bill, where you were the one leading the charge?

Staggs

I can remember several when I was still on the back row, so it would have been in the first year or two. I’m not a very original person outside of education. This passed in ’96, so it was my first session and I was bringing a bill to put the Music Hall of Fame in Muskogee. The fellow who was pushing this idea was in Muskogee, and he asked me if I thought I could get a bill passed for that, and I thought, “Sure. That wouldn’t be any problem. We’re just gonna put the Music Hall of Fame in Muskogee.” Well, the legislator from Shawnee jumped up and he was very concerned. They had lots of things they thought ought to be in a music hall of fame and why shouldn’t it be in Shawnee. Tulsa, which has the Jazz Hall of Fame, thought that we were going to try to take over everything that they did. So I started out in committee with having to do some more work explaining to them that this statewide music hall of fame would be an umbrella hall of fame. It would cover all kinds of music.

We have an awful lot of people who have been inducted into the Music Hall of Fame that country and western happens to be their genre, but we were interested in anybody that had been a long-time resident of Oklahoma or had been born and lived here for a significant period of time. I had to do some work to convince the people from Shawnee and I thought I wasn’t going to be able to, I really did. I had some doubts, and I don’t usually have too many doubts if I’ve done my homework. I can get surprised, but I had a pretty tough time on that. We finally got it passed when I convinced everybody that it was not our intent to close down any existing hall of fame or inhibit anyone else from starting a hall of fame that would represent the individual who had been born in that town because that would also tell us this is someone we need to induct into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame. Now it’s the Music Hall of Fame and Museum, and we’re working to improve that.

Finchum  

Are there any other bills that you’re proud of that came through?

Staggs

Well, I was chair of Education—or one area of education at a time, for several years. I always considered it my responsibility to encourage and maybe help improve a good bill whether it belonged to me or someone else. I felt like it was very important for me not to hear bills that were not good. You don’t want to take a risk that the bill gets away from you and someone thinks, “Well that sounds good,” when it is not good. I did
a lot of not-hearing bills. I felt like it was just as important for me to see that the legislation we sent out was good legislation insofar as we could improve it to make it that way and also to keep bad legislation from coming out. Bad legislation sometimes depends on the philosophy of the party you belong to.

Now that the republicans are in control of the House, we have had legislation that I really hate to see come through. Republicans have the opportunity, because of their number in the House, to be able to pass those, and the Senate has a difficult time because of their number being able to kill those bills because of the 24-24 split in the Senate. I’m concerned that we will continue to have good education legislation. I was vice-chair of some other committees, but I was never a chair of any committee that was not the education or one segment of education or another.

**Finchum**

*How often were you the only woman on the committee?*

**Staggs**

I don’t believe I was ever the only woman on education, and that’s a very interesting observation. Many times men thought they should put women on these committees they called soft committees. It’s interesting that you have more education legislation than almost any other legislation. Why do we consider it soft legislation or soft issues? The very first term I was there, there was a committee called Family Issues or something like that, and it was a wicked committee. It really got tough, tough issues. The woman who was in charge of it was a tough, tough person, and she handled it very, very well, and I was very proud of her. But they think family issues are going to be things that people will readily agree on. We’re having lots of controversy in our whole country over things that most of us would consider family issues, over changing the way we handle divorces or gay issues, or all of those things. They are not soft issues. There were always women on education because they thought that was a soft place to put them.

That was not the only committee I would be on or other women would be on. I think many women chose education because they liked it. We got to choose four committees we would like to be on. The leadership made sure that there weren’t too many people already on that committee. I think that sometimes it was a choice women made, but I also think sometimes men thought it was a committee women would know more about than energy or insurance or things like that. Women are interested in energy, and we’re also interested in insurance, and there are a lot of women who are by themselves because they choose to be that way. They choose not to get married. There are a lot of women who are single because they’re divorced or they are also single because their spouses died. They need to know about energy, and they need to know about all
of these issues. They don’t need to be left out of them because—it’s kind
of like going to buy a car and the salesman never talks to you if you’ve
got your husband with you.

**Finchum**  
*Describe a typical day. How early would you start your day and how late would you work in the evening, typically?*

**Staggs**  
My philosophy was, “I’m going to try to get all my work done in
Oklahoma City and not have to take it home with me,” because I liked to
do things with my husband and also because I was well-known to show
up at everything. I wanted to know what people in my district were
doing. My husband loved pie auctions so we always went to all the 4-H
and the FFA [Future Farmers of America] and anybody who had a pie
auction—we could probably show up there.

I always went in early. Usually I
was at the Capitol by 7:00am or 7:30am and I’ve stayed till 10:00pm or 11:00pm. I did that more when I
was there at the very first because you don’t have a history of the laws,
unless you happen to be an attorney. Since I wasn’t an attorney, I needed
to go back and look at things and maybe even talk to someone else. Bill
Settle, who was there during the first part of my time in the legislature,
was also a late person.

**Finchum**  
*Which floor was your office on? Did you get to move around?*

**Staggs**  
Oh, yes. My office started in what they call the fishbowl, and we shared
secretaries. And it was on the third floor, I think—yes, I’m almost
certain it was. Then we went around on another wing of it. I really liked
the third floor. They decided to move some of the staff out to another
place and expand the area where the legislators were and, when they did,
they didn’t have any marble to replace some of the marble that was in
the hallway, so they did carpet and marble, and carpet and marble.

You can’t imagine how the noise of heels and shoes went down the hall
and we loved it there. Jari, Mary and I were usually pretty close to each
other looking at where our offices were, as well. I was never on the
fourth floor. I was only on the fifth floor after the republicans came to
office, and the fifth floor was where most of the republicans were when
we were in power—when the democrats had the majority in the
legislature. The offices were smaller. You had to climb five flights of
stairs. Of course, for the tomboy that was just good exercise for me and I
didn’t really mind that part. But the offices were pretty small.

**Finchum**  
*Did you have a role model? A mentor?*

**Staggs**  
No. I really didn’t, and I really haven’t. At different times, I have looked
to people for different things. If there’s something that I consider them to be pretty good at I try to talk with them and learn what I need to know about whatever that issue is. I don’t suppose I’ve ever had one person in my life. The closest that I would come to would be my husband because he is so extremely laid back. He’s … he’s just, you know, real cool. He rarely ever gets excited or upset about something, and that’s a good person to have around. That attribute alone is one that I probably need more. I need his help, too, when it comes to saying no to things because I’m not particularly good at saying no. If I can figure out a way to squeeze it in, and it helps somebody, then I’ll try to do it.

**Finchum**

*How long have you been married?*

**Staggs**

I am not good with numbers. I do not even remember our anniversary date. We will have been married—I can do it like this—in ’59 was when we were married, so in ’09 we will have been married fifty years so we have been married forty-eight years this August.

**Finchum**

*Do you have a particular political philosophy?*

**Staggs**

I’m a democrat and I suppose my political philosophy has to do with my personal philosophy and the things that I’ve always believed in, and my husband has, too. He never came to an event to hear me speak. He said, “I can hear you at home.” But if they had kids doing something, he always went with me and we’re both like that. We like to do things with kids. He is very good about helping people. Now, he’s not so good about helping me with the yard work, although he has been pretty good this year because of the ice storm and we’ve had such an unusual amount of it. But I happen to like doing it anyway and he doesn’t happen to like doing it, so that’s part of the difference. But we like to help people. If we see people that have difficulties or they ask us to help them with something, we try to.

That’s probably been one of my worst situations since I left office. I have always tried to help people. I’ll always call you back. There are only a couple of people in my district who can say that I didn’t return a telephone call, and it’s because I punched the erase button instead of the forward button to the next message. I always return telephone calls. I have a lot of people now who call me and still ask me questions. I’ve got to do some research today on a bill that’s in the legislature and get a message to a guy who wants me to let him know how it’s going, and I will. I still have friends who work at the legislature. Staff people have always been gracious to me whether it’s when I was there or now. I appreciate that because they know they’re really answering this for a citizen in the state, and that’s good.
The only thing is I need to learn to say, “You have a new legislator, and you really need…”—I know what I should say. “You really need to call them. They would want to do this for you—I certainly would hope so—because they want you to vote for them the next time.” But they end up being people that I know.

I will tell you another philosophy though that I’m glad you let me talk long enough to remember this. I think that many, many women who are my age have this same philosophy although they may not verbalize it—and maybe they don’t even realize it, but many of us have been the first ones to do things in different areas. I was the first female superintendent in Tahlequah and although interim, the first interim female superintendent in Muskogee, and the first one to do several things. As an administrator, I was the first secondary female principal. And my philosophy has always been that I want to do a good enough job so people will not say, “Well, I’ll tell you what, I’ll never vote for another woman again because of the way she [Barbara] was.” People never say, “I’m not gonna vote for another man.”

Finchum: That’s true.

Staggs: But they would say, “I’m not gonna vote for another woman,” if I had done a lousy job in some of those places—or, “I’m not ever gonna put a woman in that position.” It’s going to take quite a while for women to be treated that equally. I see women who climb poles to do outside work for the telephone company. I don’t remember seeing them until maybe just the last few years.

Finchum: That’s true.

Staggs: I want women to be able to do whatever it is they want to do and not have someone say, “We had a woman do that once before and we won’t ever make that mistake again.”

Finchum: Is there anything you wish you had accomplished while you were in those twelve years that you just couldn’t get done?

Staggs: There were lots of things, yes. I wanted to get money into the teacher retirement, and it didn’t make any difference if it was democrats or republicans. We made only one change that was a significant change, and it was moving the fund from which teacher retirement got its revenue over to sales and personal income taxes. With the republicans in there now and their desire to always reduce taxes that amount of money has gone down. So that’s the one thing I regret the very, very most. I’m pleased with some things that I was able to do in education.
Is there anything I need to ask that I haven’t thought of?

I don’t know. I’m going to look down this first list you gave me.

Okay.

It doesn’t do any good to ask me these things about my prior experience in political things because I didn’t have any. With an incumbent staying in, usually endorsements don’t leave the incumbent. That’s the reason they always say it’s easier to win as an incumbent. I didn’t have a lot of groups that endorsed me initially and I understood that.

Did I have any people support me? Well, yeah, I had a lot of people support me but as far as groups collectively, even OEA—now the teachers in my town did support me, but OEA didn’t because they went with the incumbent. The Speaker of the House came over and had his picture taken with the incumbent and it infuriated me, and I thought he ought to just be quiet. And I said something to Bill [Settle], and he said, “Oh, the Speaker will always support the incumbent. That’s just one of those political policies that they do.” And I said, “I’ll just remember that.” And after the election was over and I had won and the Speaker called me, he said, “I wanted you to know that I’m happy for you and we’re going to be able to work together.” And I said, “Yes, I’ll give you an opportunity to apologize in some way.” (Laughter) Anyway, he’s a good friend of mine and he’s somebody that everyone would recognize, but it was fun.

There were so many things that I didn’t know, that I had to learn. And they weren’t things that bothered me. I didn’t know that was the way it was done. I taught parliamentary procedure in school. I knew I was going to be able to teach everybody over there how to do parliamentary procedure, and turned out they don’t use the same form. It was just hilarious. There were so many things that were different from what I anticipated. I thought the legislators were all going to be so glad to have me because I came with all of this information that they needed to have.

A lot of people say that teachers are not good at working in campaigns. I’d never heard anybody say it until after I got in office, and I can’t say that that’s true because they were the people who did a million things for me. When I had telephone numbers that needed to be looked up or when I needed someone to do a poll for me, I got some teachers to do it and told them how to do it. I know they did a good job because it was pretty on when I looked at what the results were. I think that education, and my experience in education, were significant factors.

Not only did I say I was concerned about and interested in education, I
had a background of having been there. When I say I was never in any political thing before—education can be pretty political, too, especially when you’re a superintendent or a principal. I did have that little experience, but basically I just had some wonderful teachers who came to help me. I think people just need to ask them more, and maybe that’s what we need to do with a lot of people is ask them to do things for us. I’m impressed with the young people who are getting interested in politics. It isn’t a large group, and I’m concerned that the future may have fewer people who go to vote than what we even have now. And I really believe we need to work at keeping people focused on—if you don’t go vote—that’s the minimum thing that you should do—then you should be ashamed of yourself.

The next thing is you ought to be active. I was just recently elected the county democrat chair in Muskogee County. I really wasn’t ready to do it but I thought maybe I can get some more people involved and we can work to change some things. We have two young people in this group, and we had about eighty that day—only two young people, and I’m really concerned about that. The young people who are interested seem to be vibrantly interested, but I’m not sure the democrats are working as hard as we ought to work to get young people moved back in. I was at the high school the other day and a young man came up to me and said, “I want to come do so me things for you. I see that you’re going to be working with the democrat party in Muskogee.” So, you know, little by little I think we can get them in but I am concerned about that.

You had a question about tough choices. That’s a pretty funny one. Because I had spent so much time in school, when we had the concealed weapons bill, I had a pretty difficult time with it. We kept guns locked up. I wasn’t that concerned about them, and my Dad had taught me how to take care of them. Ross [husband] had taught our sons how to take care of them, but the notion of concealed weapons really kind of bothered me because I thought we’re going to have kids bringing these things to school. Well, it’s true. We do. But I had one call from my husband in twelve years, and he called and said, “I am one of your constituents. I want to tell you that I would appreciate it very much if you would vote for the concealed weapons bill.” And I said, “Well, I’ll be sure to write this down that you have called, and we’ll remember that, and I appreciate it.”

Then I had a jillion women—and I don’t know how big a jillion is, but it’s a whole bunch—and they were women who worked in the evening, worked at night—went out to their cars after it was dark. They worked in the hospital or they worked different places doing late jobs and said, “Make an honest woman out of me. I carry a gun, and I will make it a concealed weapon, and I’ll take all the training I’m supposed to have.”
And it was the women who made the difference for me. I still have those reservations because of the school, but women were saying that they were in places after dark where they did not feel safe. They obviously had spent a little time learning to use a gun because I had some who told me that either they had spouses who had helped them or they had children—in some cases, grown children who had helped them—and that bill bothered me. I did vote for the bill.

I had some others that I disagree with my constituents on and I will vote the way the constituents want me to vote, unless I can really see that they don’t understand an issue. Then I’ve always told my constituents, “If you and I disagree, it’s your responsibility to educate me or it’s my responsibility to educate you.” One thing I always did was a survey. I did a survey every year, not just election years, because I would tell them what I anticipated seeing in legislature the next year and ask them how they felt about it. I had pretty good response to that. And not only does it give you an excuse—like on the concealed weapons bill when all of them called me and I went over to that side—it also reinforces you when all of you seem to agree. And one of the things that really pleased me in the twelve years I was in the legislature was my constituents and I agreed the majority of the time on most of the things that I asked them about.

I was very surprised on Right to Work. When I first started asking my constituents about Right to Work, it was, oh, a very miniscule number of people who were in favor it. And I must have asked that then for four or five years, and those in favor of it increased in number over the years. It never got significantly above fifty percent, but I would say initially it was down in the twenties and it was an interesting observation because it means that those folks in favor of Right to Work were doing some kind of a good campaign that was convincing people that that needed to be here. I’ve never been a person in favor of Right to Work. So that was a real surprise to me, and I’m sure that we have passed lots of things that have had really good campaigns with the public as well as with the legislators to get them passed. I may have been guilty of falling prey to some of those campaigns, too.

Finchum

But over the course of the year, you have to go through an awful lot of bills, too, don’t you?

Staggs

Yes, and that was a surprise to me. I was sure that nobody up there was reading those bills, and I was going to be the only one reading them. You know, I just had all kinds of grandiose ideas about (Laughter) what it was going to be like when I arrived. I discovered that, by far, the majority of the legislators read the bills when I went to committee, if the bill was in that committee, it was rare indeed for a person sitting there
not to have read the legislation. We didn’t always agree on the bill, of course, but I knew that they had studied it and I was interested in their opinion on that.

Another thing that surprised me about the legislature is that all of us have a background, and the experiences that we’ve had are the things that help us do a good job. And I would say that almost everybody in the House and Senate has a friend in that body who is good at something. They may be insurance people. They either own an insurance office or they’ve been in insurance sales for years, and when we have insurance bills, then we go visit with that person and it doesn’t make any difference what party they’re in. When it comes to that, you want the best information you can get. I’m not going to ask the author of the bill so often as I’m going to ask a person who’s had experience in that area because they will generally tell you both sides of it.

And I also have a reputation—when a lobbyist would visit me—“I’ll be happy to hear your side of it, but I also want you to tell me what the other side is as well.” And the lobbyists that we had in Oklahoma City, with the exception of maybe a couple of them, didn’t lie to you. They would tell you the good and the bad, and they’re going to embellish the good as much as they possibly can, but they would tell you both sides of it. And they’d say, “This is what the other side is saying and wanting.” Those things are important to you, and I think you decide you’re going to not deal with somebody who doesn’t tell you the truth.

**Finchum**

> My last question is when history is written about you, what would you like for it to say?

**Staggs**

I would like them to say that I listened to my constituents and I tried as often as I could to support those things that they wanted me to support and to not support those things that they wanted me to vote against, and I hope that I was always truthful with them.

**Finchum**

> I’d say you were. Well, that’s all my questions. Thank you very much for visiting with us today. This was great.

-------- End of interview--------