



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

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Podcast Hits the Century Mark | July 13, 2020 | OAS Episode 100

Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith.

Today’s podcast marks the 100th episode of “Our American States,” a milestone we’d like to mark by bringing back the original host of the podcast, Gene Rose, and recalling some of our favorite moments from the last three and a half years.

So, Gene welcome back to the podcast.

Gene: Thanks, Ed. It’s great to be back with you.

Time Marker (TM): 0:47

Ed: Gene, you hosted and produced more than 80 podcasts on everything from elections to pot and cybersecurity to natural disasters. You also had some interesting interview subjects, such as Frank Luntz, Johnny Taylor and Doris Kearns Goodwin. So, which ones do you want to revisit?

Gene: Well, I’m going to say something that thrilled me every time I heard a guest utter these words, “that’s a great question, Ed.” I think you’ve hit on the two key components of a podcast. It’s the topics that you learn so much about and then it’s the people that you talk to. I know that you’ll probably agree that after most interviews, you feel more informed and that you’ve got to feel the passion of the people who are behind these critical policy issues.

So, in addition to the topics that you mentioned, I was proud of the podcasts we did on the safety of school buses, opioids, the historic number of women elected to state legislatures, brain development, civil discourse, rape kits, homeless youth, and lots of other topics. And I also feel that we weighed in early on, on such topics as sports gaming and ride hailing services.

So, Ed, I really appreciate you allowing me to share a few of my favorite moments. You mentioned Frank Luntz, who at the time was known for his work with the Republican party. In our eighth episode, he talked about switching his focus to state governments. And here's why.

Frank Luntz (Episode 8) 1:44-2:33

"The polling data shows that Washington is completely broken and may be beyond repair. Conversely, the public has significant confidence in their state and local governments to pick up the slack, to do the things that they think government should do. From education to poverty, from roads and transportation to infrastructure, they want the answers and the accountability to come from state governments rather than the federal government. And the reason why is that they feel that state government is much more close to them, that you can actually reach out and touch and grab an elected official if something goes wrong, and that the money is spent more wisely, more efficiently and more effectively on state governments rather than the federal government."

Gene: And I really enjoyed my interview with Doris Kearns Goodwin a few episodes later, catching her before a speech she gave at the 2017 Legislative Summit in Boston. She was nearing the end of writing her book, "Leadership in Turbulent Times."

Dori Kearns Goodwin (Episode 17) 3:11-4:10

"I think it's true that a crisis creates more opportunities for great leadership, especially in a system like America where there are so many checks and balances that it's hard sometimes to get your ideas or agenda through. But in a crisis, there's a momentum, that you know you have to deal with the issue at hand, and so you've got a chance for greater leadership. Abigail Adams said during the American Revolution to John Adams that 'great necessities create great virtues and that these are the times in which a genius would want to live.'

"So, the crisis, whether it's war or depression, creates an opportunity for an historic leader, but you have to have the right temperament and the right leadership skills to make use of that opportunity, so that you can see that in the 1850s you had two leaders in there before Lincoln who were not able to stem the secession tide that was already beginning to build in the South and the North, and you had Lincoln come along at a moment when he had the right temperament and the right skills to deal with it."

Gene: We had one other celebrity I enjoyed spending time with, and that was Chef Hugh Acheson, who most people will recognize from several of those television cooking shows. He was involved in a program called No Kid Hungry, addressing school lunches.

Chef Hugh Acheson (Episode 61) 2:14-3:23

"I think being a citizen means you try to affect your community and your state in whatever way you can. And just the affiliation with food and what I do professionally as a chef led me to look deeper into ... and also being a father, led me to look into the public schools that we send our kids to and seeing the real issue there, that kids weren't getting the nourishment they needed.

"No Kid Hungry was really one group that was really dedicated to showing the disparity in this

country, that 1 out of 6 kids is in need of good nourishment. And schools are particularly an influential place to get those kids what they need to survive and to excel. You know, to me looking at the greatest asset that we have, which is this next generation coming up, it's kind of like you've got a beautiful car parked outside, but if you don't put gas in the tank, you get nothing from it.

"So, we've got to win this race and the way we do that is we empower a generation and we nourish a generation. And so, this is just a small part of what I can do to make sure that we're concentrating on the right things in state legislatures and really across the country."

Gene: And another big name we got for the podcast was the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Robert Redfield. It was not only memorable for being able to talk to a high-profile guest about vaccinations, but also because I conducted the interview and edited the podcast in a hospital room in Nashville, Tennessee, where I was undergoing a medical procedure.

**Dr. Robert Redfield, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Episode 66)
16:42-17:52**

"Well, I think first and foremost I think the leadership that state legislators... I mean, they're trusted leaders in their community, and I think them in a sense standing shoulder-to-shoulder with their public health officials to affirm the important value of vaccination to their constituencies and communities is really, really important. Each jurisdiction is different, and CDC has always worked and defers to the local state and tribal/territorial health departments to wrestle with what is the best way for them to affect vaccine policy in their jurisdiction.

"But I do think a clear, resounding message from trusted leaders like state legislators that vaccines are safe and they're effective, that they can support their public health leaders in that they don't cause autism and that they really are important ways to prevent diseases, that in and of themselves can cause significant mortality and morbidity."

Gene: I got to interview a few book authors, and one of the more memorable ones for me was talking with Matthew Desmond, who wrote a book called "Evictions." It was a landmark book releasing what is believed to be the first data collected on people who are given eviction notices in America, and he was a real fascinating person to talk to.

Matthew Desmond (Episode 48) 4:40-4:52/ 5:55-6:18

"So, the American government does not track evictions. It's kind of like if we had a country that didn't know how many people dropped out of high school or got a cancer diagnosis each year. But that's how it is with evictions.... (5:55-6:18) ... we found that the last full year that we could count, which was 2016, about 2.3 million Americans lived in a home that received an eviction notice – 2.3 million. So how big is that number? That's a huge number; that's twice the number of people that get arrested for drug crimes, for example. That's 36 times the number of people that die of overdoses."

Gene: And, then Ed, sometimes there is the one quote that just sticks with you long after the podcast is put to bed. I remember one from State Senator Whitney Westerfield, a Republican from Kentucky, who at the time chaired the NCSL Juvenile Justice Principles Work Group.

Kentucky State Senator Whitney Westerfield (Episode 14) 17:48-18:20

“There’s a quote, Gene, that I want to share with the listeners of this podcast, and I hope it encourages them the way it has me. It’s from Frederick Douglass: ‘It’s easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.’ If ever we had a chance as legislators across the country to do something good for our young constituents, it’s when they’re young; it’s when they have the chance to change the trajectory of their lives, and even make a generational positive impact on their families for generations to come because of the difference that can be made.”

Gene: And you know, Ed, I heard so many powerful stories from legislators that we interviewed. On a podcast on foster care, I was really touched when I interviewed State Representative Ivy Spohnholz, who is a Democrat from Alaska.

Alaska State Representative Ivy Spohnholz (Episode 80) (1:46-3:02)

“Well, my mother is a survivor of childhood abuse and neglect, and then as an adult wanted to care-give for children who had had similar experiences as her. And so, I grew up in a foster family where we had siblings whose families needed a break and needed some skills, or some learning, or were having troubles who came and lived with us. And I really profoundly understood through that experience the importance of foster parents.

“My husband and I, however, we both had fulltime jobs and knew that we couldn’t dedicate sort of our fulltime lives to this work as foster parents, and we decided what we would do is we would focus in on one child, and we would make a forever commitment to a foster child. And we became licensed foster parents and started meeting children with the intention of adopting a foster child. We ended up adopting a 9-year-old girl who had been in foster care off and on for most of her life and she is now a 21-year-old young woman and is healthy and happy and I’m so proud of her.”

Gene: One of the podcasts I’m most proud of, Ed, is a two-part series called, “What I Wish I Knew.” In it we interviewed four people who were current or former legislators, who talked about what new legislators should expect when they start their service in legislatures. Here is a quote from Toi Hutchinson, who was a Democrat Illinois State Senator and NCSL President at the time.

Toi Hutchinson Episode 56 (5:23-6:24)

“For some people, the number of times they walk up to me and say: ‘I’ve never met a senator Before’ or, ‘You don’t look like a senator.’ And I get to say: What did you think a senator looks like? Let me add to that.

“So, it is hard to manage all the people that you meet because at any given point in time, it can be the advocates on an issue, it can be your other colleagues, it can be people in the other chamber, it can be just regular constituents. You just know that this is a job that you do on behalf of a whole bunch of people that you may never meet, you may never see again, and on

behalf of people who don't make the newspapers, and nobody writes articles about them and they don't get invited to do podcasts.

"So, you have to be humble enough to get: I'm one person swimming in this sea. And so, I try to give the best of what I have in every encounter and in every engagement. And that takes into account that sometimes I'm tired and sometimes I'm sick and sometimes I don't feel good and sometimes I'm sad. I'm human, just like everybody else. But, if you don't like people, don't do this job."

Gene: Ed, I also had the pleasure to interview a number of state legislative staff over the course of my time doing the podcast. They really are unsung heroes of the legislative process. I'm a former staffer of the Missouri House of Representatives myself, so I have an affinity for the people who work in the legislatures and never seek or want any recognition. In Episode 23, I interviewed Martha Wigton, who was and still is the Director of the Georgia House of Representatives Budget and Research Office. Now, as we do Episode 100, she is the NCSL Staff Chair. At the time, I asked her about the rewards of her job.

Martha Wigton (Episode 23) 19:00-33

"Sometimes the reinforcement comes in the smallest ways. It might be a phone call from a constituent where you're able to actually help them solve a problem very quickly. Or it could be something that's really long-term where you've worked on a project for a couple of years and it finally comes to fruition. So I would say I get reinforced in my job in a lot of ways, some small, some large, but they just continually keep me going and I reinvest my energy back into the job because it's just a lot of fun and very rewarding."

Gene: As you know, Ed, I am now doing my second term of service at NCSL. I was first hired by former NCSL Executive Director Bill Pound, who I have so much respect for, and it was the end of an era when he left the organization in 2019. And, of course, we had to do an interview with him before he left.

Bill Pound (Episode 71) 17:01-17:13 / 17:46-18:14

"I've never regretted it. It's a chance to do things rather than just talk about them. I've always been interested in politics and public policy, both. This combines them. I wanted to be Executive Director for the challenge of it because I like the organization, I like what we do. I and I think most of the people here really believe in legislatures, that they are the first branch of government because of the article in the federal and most state constitutions. They are the one that is the most representative of the people. It's the issues they deal with, and the very interesting people that are in them, both as members and working for them."

Gene: And, finally Ed, as I hinted to earlier, I think we did, and as your podcasts related to COVID-19 are proving, an excellent job of being on top of, or ahead of issues. And, I might add, we were a pretty good judge of talent too.

In Episode 5, we interviewed a gentleman named Tim Storey about the qualities of legislative leadership. Tim, as we all know, replaced Bill Pound as Executive Director and now is the second

person to hire me at NCSL. So, when I re-read the transcript from that early interview with Tim, it's plain to see why he was a good choice to lead the organization.

Tim Storey (Episode 5) 26:35-27:34

"We have great leaders and I think the challenges are extraordinary, as they always are. We always think our times are the most challenging and difficult and we certainly live in challenging and difficult times. But I've met so many men and women in state legislatures in leadership roles, and there are just some tremendously talented people out there who are working tirelessly at great self-sacrifice. I don't think... sometimes other legislators don't appreciate it. Certainly, the public doesn't often appreciate the hours and struggle that these people go through and the sacrifice that they make.

"So, when it comes to legislatures and our democracy and our legislative institution, I feel very good about things because I know the people who are working on it, and they have tremendously good motives and intentions. They have lots of different ideas. They all have the right goal, which is to make life better for the people who live in their states. If they keep an eye on that, things are going to be really good for the states moving forward."

TM: 15:21

Ed: Well, Gene, I hope our listeners enjoyed that blast from past podcasts as much as I did. I have a much shorter track record, but I would like to share just a few moments from podcasts I've done in the past few months about the pandemic.

One person I interviewed about how to communicate during a pandemic had deep experience in many other disasters. Mississippi Lt. Gov. Delbert Hoseman spoke about some of the past events in his state and how he tried to bring some humanity and hope to citizens.

About 16:50-18:40 | Episode 88

"I told somebody if I looked out at the walls of the capitol, out my window here at the capitol and I saw locusts on the front, I was just going to go straight to church. That would be the last thing we hadn't had here.

"We've had floods, fires and just about everything else. We've had hurricanes and now pandemics. We've never had a situation like this, and the country is like this too. It's not anything just solely for Mississippi.

"But what I have seen over the years, the first thing to do is to make sure that you analyze and give people good facts. When we had these tornadoes and whatnot, we need to tell how many people have been damaged and where you can go for relief or SBA loans, those kinds of things.

"But I've always just gone to wherever the disaster is. That's held up well for me. I had a protocol when I was Secretary of State for 12 years. We had to sign the emergency declaration. So, I would sign with the Governor and then I'd go get in my truck and I usually had two or three cases of water, a bunch of candy bars, that kind of thing, and I headed for wherever the disaster was.

“Sometimes people just need to see you show up and know that somebody cares, that it’s not just somebody on TV. So, I try to go where those people are. I help them haul out furniture, whatever it takes, and that’s been helpful for me. I’ve learned a lot.”

Ed: By far my favorite part of doing a podcast is the chance to speak to some remarkable people. One of those was Dr. James Hotz, a physician who has been working in rural Georgia since the 1970s. I asked him if he’d seen anything like COVID in his decades as a doctor.

About 15:05-18:30 | Episode 90

“We’ve not faced a pandemic. We’ve not faced something where not only are you taking care of challenging patients and a lot of them who can become critically ill... just lost a neighbor yesterday... but you’re also at risk yourself. HIV, initially when we saw patients and we didn’t know it was a virus... we had case #420... we really weren’t certain how it was transmitted. But once the facts got out, we felt more comfortable in managing it. It didn’t feel like that kind of personal risk if you used standard blood precautions.

“This thing is a little different because it’s highly infectious. I’ve got four kids who are doctors. Just got a call from my son who is on the faculty at Indiana University and found out he had just come down, he’s very sick, and he’s got a Covid virus. So, he’s got three kids at home, a wife, and nobody can help him now.”

Ed: As you mentioned, Gene, interviewing legislators brings out the stories of their efforts that are often little known. In a podcast on efforts during the pandemic to feed the 22 million kids who get free or reduced lunch at school, Representative Moffie Funk talked about what efforts are going on in Montana.

21:10-22:10 | Episode 91

“Montana is very much a local-control state. So, every district is doing it the way that they feel best serves their kids. So, there is delivery through buses, which also delivers the technology and the learning.

“Larger districts mostly have pickup sites for once-a-day or twice-a-day lunch and breakfast. They’re also working with food pantries and other resources to give dinners and snacks. And the waiver is allowing for bulk meals, which is reducing some of the risk and increasing efficiency.

“It’s very difficult knowing that you’re delivering food to a home where there are other hungry people.”

Ed: One of the most interesting interviews was with Dr. Nirav Shah, a senior scholar at Stanford University’s Clinical Excellence Research Center, and a former commissioner for the New York State Department of Health. We were discussing pandemic modeling and what was needed to reopen our society. Given the increased number of cases we’ve been seeing, his thoughts on testing seem worth hearing again.

11:17-13:54 Episode 94

“Our hope is that as we get adequate testing and high-quality testing, we can start to look at testing along the lines of what they’ve done successfully in Germany, in South Korea, in Taiwan. Other countries that have robust testing programs, which is one of the first things you really need in place to open up, test people multiple times, they test wide swaths of the population, they test people who have no symptoms or no reasons to be tested otherwise, unlike how we’re testing here.

“Now, it’s important to understand this. Broad testing and tracing are what will allow our economy to be normal again.

“So, I’m optimistic that as we have these tests and tracing programs built up, as we have these programs built up, we will be able to open up the economy. But until then, we have a large risk of backsliding.

Ed: And finally, let me wrap up with former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, who I interviewed just last month. Bush wrote an Op-ed in the Wall Street journal about leadership during the pandemic. I asked him where he saw leadership in this emergency.

“I think Governor DeWine in Ohio was early to recognize the public health risk, communicated directly to the people of Ohio in a folksy way that told them the truth, was totally transparent about what the challenges were, and gave people hope and connected on a human level.

“I think there are many examples, both Democrats and Republicans, mayors and governors that have shown that kind of leadership, and it starts with truth telling, because this is such an unprecedented time when we don’t have all the data necessary to make a clear choice, there’s a lot of uncertainty, and I think it’s really important for people in public life to tell people: we don’t have all the facts, but here are the facts that we do have and, based on that, this is what I’m proposing that we do.

“I’m proud of the fact that states and localities have done a pretty good job dealing with all of the complexities.”

Ed: Well Gene, thanks for making a return appearance on the podcast to mark this milestone. Let’s not wait until episode 200 to have you back.

Gene: Always glad to return to the show, Ed. But I have to say, you’re doing a terrific job and I’m really enjoying being a listener.

Ed: And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes, Google Play or Spotify. You may also go to Google Play, iTunes or Spotify to have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Ed Smith. Thanks for listening and being part of “Our American States.”

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