

Transcript of Interview with State Representative Lita Cohen

KAPLIN: First we're going to speak about your childhood. Where were you born?

COHEN: In Philadelphia. At Jefferson Hospital.

KAPLIN: And you grew up here?

COHEN: Yes.

KAPLIN: OK. Where were your parents born?

COHEN: My mother was born in Philadelphia. Her parents were married in Chicago, but in America. They came from Lithuania. My father came here as a child from Poland and his family lived in Pittsburgh.

KAPLIN: And how did he come from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia?

COHEN: A job. My father was a mathematical genius. And he went to the University of Pittsburgh, then went into business. His job took him first to Indianapolis and then to Philadelphia.

KAPLIN: Where he met your mother?

COHEN: Where he met my mother on a blind date.

KAPLIN: And, you said your father was a mathematical genius. What did your mother do?

COHEN: My mother, who is still alive, was a schoolteacher and has a Master's from Temple University in education.

KAPLIN: Were your parents active in politics?

COHEN: My parents were not, but my uncle, my mother's older brother lived with us and he was very, very active in politics. In 19, somewhere around 1915, or 1918, he founded the Young Republicans of Philadelphia.

KAPLIN: Did this have an influence on your political aspirations?

COHEN: Absolutely. My Uncle Billy was a very extraordinary man and he really influenced my life and my decision to become a lawyer. So much of my life was influenced by my Uncle Billy.

KAPLIN: Do you have any siblings?

COHEN: No, just me.

KAPLIN: What were your interests as a child?

COHEN: I decided to become a lawyer when I was ten years old. Before that, I think I wanted to become a cowgirl and when we get into the gun issue and you could ask me about guns, I'll talk about that. But when I was ten years old, I said I wanted to become a lawyer, and, of course, everyone laughed, because girls at that time didn't become lawyers. But, I was always interested in public service. My parents weren't politically active, my mother particularly, was very philanthropic. and active in many community organizations and charities and ever since I could remember, what I wanted to do was save the world through public service and government service particularly.

KAPLIN: So, since you knew that you wanted to be a lawyer, can I assume that you knew, you always knew you wanted to go to college?

COHEN: Oh, absolutely. It was a given in my family. My father is a college graduate, and my mother, as I said, has a Master's degree, so it was just a given.

KAPLIN: How did you choose the University of Pennsylvania?

COHEN: I first fell in love with Penn as a child when my father had season tickets to the football games. On Saturdays, when I didn't have a piano lesson, he would take me to the Penn football games and, in those days, Penn's football team was a major factor. And, we would walk through the campus and I loved it and my mother didn't want my to go away to college being her only child. So, Penn was it. I always wanted to go to Penn.

KAPLIN: You spoke about your Uncle Billy and his influence on you to become involved in public service and political life, were there other factors that prompted your decision to major in political science?

COHEN: Just being alert to what was going on in the world and disturbed about inequities to people, so that... just my teachers

at Lower Merion High School were very interested in current events. So that, growing up in an environment of community activism, it just was very natural to major in poli sci, as we called it.

KAPLIN: Well, in high school or in college were you involved in any student activities which would related to your future career in politics such as student government

COHEN: Yes.

KAPLIN: Or even radio?

COHEN: I was not involved in radio at the time. In high school, I was a member of student council. I was editor-in-chief of the newspaper, so that... that created activism. And, I was very active in a lot of student organizations in high school. And, of course, in college, I was also a participant in the Pre-Law Society, and other organizations that were really political. I worked in the 1959 mayoral election in Philadelphia. I worked for Thatcher Longstreth who was running. And, in 1960, I had a Faulk Foundation Scholarship to work at Republican City Committee in Philadelphia and, ah, and I worked for, I can't believe it, Richard Nixon. (laughing)

KAPLIN: Oh. Tell me a little bit more about that experience. What was that like?

COHEN: It was thrilling. It was very exciting. I spent a good, I spent the first semester, the fall semester of my junior year really in politics and working in the Presidential election. And was, in fact, one of the major participants in having Nixon come to Philadelphia. And he came to Penn. And we had a big parade. And, I remember it was in the middle of exams, and my mother and I stayed up all night working on a pattern to make a Nixon dress. It was a white dress with "NIXON" in letters all over the place. And, it was not only the issue of matching the pattern but if you turn "NIXON" upside-down, its "NOXIN." (laughing) So, we had to make sure that the material was positioned exactly correctly, so that I could sit in the back of a convertible and wave and climb on top of the convertible and make a presentation from the Young Republicans to Nixon.

KAPLIN: Did President Nixon's future disgrace cloud your vision of politics in any way? Did it disappoint you?

COHEN: It certainly clouded my vision of Nixon and it was terribly disappointing to me. Although, by that time, I was not a supporter of Nixon. It made me, conversely, more fervent in my passion to make sure that government was right, that people were right, that it was honest, and that it did what it was supposed to do which was serve the people and improve the quality of everyone's life.

KAPLIN: Did you enjoy your time at University of Pennsylvania?

COHEN: Oh, I loved it! Seven years and it was wonderful.

KAPLIN: So, was it that experience as an undergraduate that prompted you to remain at the University? Or were there other factors that helped you decide to choose Penn Law?

COHEN: I chose Penn Law, number one, because it is one of the finest law schools in the world. And, again, it was home. By that time I was, again, deeply involved in community activities, so that I didn't want to go to a strange city and start all over again.

KAPLIN: Do you remember the application process?

COHEN: Yes. It was challenging.

KAPLIN: Was there an interview?

COHEN: Yes, yes, I was interviewed by the Dean. Yes. And we had to take LSATs, but it was in a fraternity weekend at the undergraduate school. So, I remember going out Friday night and staying out late thinking I must be insane, because I had to take the law apps the next morning. And, somehow, I did it.

KAPLIN: What was it like to be woman in law school during the 1960's? Did your class, I don't think your class had very many women.

COHEN: We started with six, we ended with four and, I believe there were 140 or 145 men. If, and I tell people now, my husband's favorite advice to me is, "Never take yourself too seriously." And, I tell that particularly when I speak to women who are experiencing the glass ceiling or prejudice or difficulty in a man's world, in a man's field. It was fun. There we were four of us surrounded by all these men. So, it was fun. It was challenging. What I found is that with many of the professors, you can not be right at the beginning of class,

male or female. Females could, at that time, almost never be right. And sometimes, we would say things, that the professor would say was totally wrong and two minutes later, a man would say exactly what we said and the professor would tell him that he was right. So, those days we were picked on. Some of our fellow students told us it was a disgrace that we were there taking up a man's spot, because we would get married and have babies and drop out. Whereas a man deserved the spot, because he would have to work and support a family. But, generally, it was wonderful. The challenge of a law school education, especially at a place like Penn. the challenge to our minds. It was the first time in my life I was taught to think. I never had to think really before. And Penn did that. I was a challenge and fun and some of the experiences were remarkable. I was in a labor law class, when someone came in from the back of the room and shouted, "President Kennedy's been shot!" So, those of us of my generation, we all know where we were when President Kennedy was shot and what happened. And these were some of the things that you remember. How Penn treated us so well, and, really, a distraught student body and how the administration gave us a hug and constantly supported us in whatever our personal needs were.

KAPLIN: Speaking of President Kennedy, I wanted to ask you, how, if at all did the politics of the time affect your legal education or your view of the legal system?

COHEN: It's all intertwined. It all, the politics of the times makes you aware of what law are fair, which are not fair, what we should encourage the government to do. And, I think, being at Penn, again, Penn supports activism and supports activism, no matter where you are or what you're doing.

KAPLIN: Professors Gorman, Levin, Lesnick and Reitz still teach at the Law School. Did you have any of those professors or do you remember them at all?

COHEN: All of the above, and I shall never forget any of them. Leo Levin, is, of course, very dear to my heart. He's a friend. He's a constituent. And, my senior seminar was taught by Leo and, I think, of all the professors gave more deference, gave more respect to women than anyone else. He was simply wonderful and we used to have senior seminars at his house. He welcomed us into his home where we were much more comfortable. The man is beyond extraordinary, because, he's not only brilliant, as all the others are, but he's a dear human being. And he really, he's really kind of warm and fuzzy. He's really just a huggy

bear. He's wonderful. He really is. Very exciting. Of course, my favorite Leo Levin story is when he was a smoker, and he was, I think, a three pack a day smoker. I remember him running out of the library, because he office was adjacent to the library, running out with his wastebasket on fire, because he had dropped a cigarette in to the basket.

Professor Gorman was my teacher his first year at Penn. And, he was, again, bright as anything. And also, Curt Reitz and Howard Lesick were really challenging. And, everyone has a different personality and you learn to adapt to their needs. So, that's an additional excitement when you are in law school; to know what you professor is looking for, there their heads are, where they're coming from. And Professor Reitz, of course, never changed his expression. He was always very serious. So the last day of class... he was always saying, "You're looking for the rabbit in the hat." That was one of his favorite sayings. I don't know if he still says it. So, the last day of class, we all presented him... we all went out, we went to ASPCA and we bought a rabbit and we bought a top hat. And when he came in to the classroom there was... he named the rabbit Blossom ... in the hat, just poking her head out. And he never cracked a smile. He just let this rabbit sit on his desk, and she was looking out, and we were hysterical. It was so funny. And he never cracked a smile. And, he just went on with the class. And we were just bowled over. And, he just went on with the last day of class.

KAPLIN: Well, it seems like Penn was as warm an environment back then, as it is today.

COHEN: I'm glad to hear it.

KAPLIN: Do you keep in touch with any of your friends from law school on a social basis?

COHEN: Absolutely. Absolutely. In fact, one of my classmates used to be a neighbor and our children grew up together and played together. Now, he lives in Israel and we visit all the time.

KAPLIN: Judge Harvey Bartle and former...

COHEN: (correcting pronunciation) Bartle.

KAPLIN: Bartle?

COHEN: Yes.

KAPLIN: Thank you and Ernie Preate were in your class.

COHEN: Yes.

KAPLIN: Do you remember them as students.

COHEN: Oh yes. And we all were and still are buddies.

KAPLIN: You remained in Philadelphia after completing law school, have you had the opportunity to work with any of your classmates?

COHEN: Not in my legal position. Of course, I did work with Ernie Preate when I was a State Rep. and he was the Attorney General. And we worked closely. Professionally, no, in our legal positions. But in community affairs we've worked together, in politics many of us have worked together, and, of course, socially.

KAPLIN: Did you intend to practice law specifically when you entered law school? You said when you were ten years old you wanted to be a lawyer, but you were also interested in politics. Was law a seg-way to politics? How and when did your plans change?

COHEN: It was all part and parcel of what I wanted to do. And, when I finished law school my first job was Assistant Region Counsel for the Department of Housing and Urban Development and then from there I was Assistant Counsel to the Philadelphia School Board, then mothered full time at home but did some legal work at home for non-profit corporations. I did agency adoptions, only agency adoptions and then I became General Counsel at WWDB and WHAT Radio and then became the Chief Operating Officer. But it was, it all fit together. Working, doing legal work, I really didn't love private practice. Excuse me. (takes drink of water) I think the biggest challenge, and for me, the best excitement was public service, working for HUD and the school board. And then, of course, the radio stations, that was really exciting, rather than being in the private practice of law.

KAPLIN: I like to speak more about the jobs you had later, but keeping a little bit with law school, I looked in your yearbook and I noticed that you were Secretary of the McKean Law Club. Can you tell me what that was? Because we don't...

COHEN: Oh, you don't have law clubs? Ah, we had clubs and for the life of me, I can't remember what we did. I know we had a dinner dance at the end of the year and I remember being the basement of the old building having meetings, and I don't remember what the meetings were about and I don't have a clue what we did. But, of course I was the secretary, because women were always the secretary. It was traditional that the women would be the secretary.

KAPLIN: What did you like most about law school?

COHEN: Learning how to think.

KAPLIN: And what did you like the least?

COHEN: Exams.

KAPLIN: Well, then it remains true today.

COHEN: Exactly.

KAPLIN: I'd like to talk a little bit about your family. I noticed that your husband was, I guess your nominator to the Bar.

COHEN: Right.

KAPLIN: How did you meet your husband?

COHEN: On a blind date.

KAPLIN: And where did he go to law school?

COHEN: He went to Temple. He went to Temple undergrad and Temple Law School and finished two years before I did.

KAPLIN: When did you marry?

COHEN: We married in April of 1966, which was well over more than a year after met?

KAPLIN: And when did you decide to have children?

COHEN: We had children. We decided a long time before we had children. Our son was born in May of 1970 and our daughter,

Shoshanna was born in December of 71. And so, we had lots of tax deductions very quickly.

KAPLIN: Your husband is also an attorney.

COHEN: Yes.

KAPLIN: What is it like to have two attorneys in a relationship?

COHEN: Well, I guess, in those days, who else would marry an attorney but another one? We talk about what we do on a day to day basis. We don't talk law. Actually, I tell my husband more about what I do. I don't know who his clients are unless I'm out socially or at an event. I don't know what most of his clients even do. He may talk in general terms about some things that he is doing. But he's really, he honors the relationship that he has as an attorney, so we don't talk about "The Law." There are so many other things to talk about; art, music, what's happening in the world, so we don't often talk about "The Law."

KAPLIN: There's been a history of both law and public service in your family. Has this filtered down to either of your children or their spouses?

COHEN: Absolutely. Absolutely. When our son was a student at Brown University, he was a big brother, he was an escort at a Planned Parenthood Clinic, he's always done public service work. And my daughter and her husband are also ver, very much involved in community events. My daughter and her husband met at New York University and they were very active in school. My daughter, actually, in high school as well as in college had been what's called a "Peer's Ears." She was an advisor about drugs and alcohol to fraternities and other groups and now that they're married and working and expectant parents, they are still involved in community organizations.

KAPLIN: You mentioned that you were, for a time, what is now termed a stay-at-home mom and that you eventually reentered the work force. How did you balance work with having children?

COHEN: Ah, well, it's the old "Supermom" concept; you sleep little, you worry a lot, and you keep a frenetic pace. My sister-in-law calls me a whirling dervish. Nobody wants to be in the kitchen with me, because I go quickly. My children have learned when they are with me they walk almost at a run, very, very quickly. And, somehow you balance it. When I was, what I term, a full-term mom at home, I did some non-profit corporation

work and some agency adoptions, but I did not have child care, so I was really there full time. But they sleep. And when they nap, that's when you do your work. And you do laundry at 3 o'clock in the morning. But, somehow, you balance it. And every once in a while, you crash, and all you want to do is sleep. But, somehow you do it. And, it's a matter of choice. My daughter is pregnant and I've urged her to put her child in day care. And to work. But she has to make that decision. I'm just giving her input. So, it's a matter of balance. My hands yearn for a manicure, then and now, but there's just no time for a manicure. I go to bed around 12 or 12:30 now and get around 5 or 5:30. But that's...

KAPLIN: So the pace has not slowed down?

COHEN: No, it hasn't.

KAPLIN: You've lived in Lower Merion Township for over 40 years.

COHEN: Yes.

KAPLIN: You obviously enjoy the area. How has it changed? Or, how have you seen the Philadelphia region change?

COHEN: Well, I'm the Mother of the City Avenue Corridor Project; the special services district. We're the first and still only of 1200 special services districts throughout the nation. We're the only special services district that incorporates two municipalities; Philadelphia and Lower Merion and that's unique. Lower Merion was much less developed, much less congested than it is today. I think the way the neighborhood has changed is, we realize that are all dependant on each other. The City Avenue Corridor project is really the shining example of the dependency and the inter-relationship between a city and it's adjacent suburb.

KAPLIN: Just the way you call it City Avenue, whereas many people refer to the street as City Line Avenue, indicates your desire in integrate both the city and the suburb.

COHEN: That's right. And the official name, the legal name of street is City Avenue. I don't know where the city line came from. But, we did a tour once, up and down the strip and al the street signs said "City Avenue," except one or two, which are now gone and they've been replaced. But, Line connotes exactly that and that's not what we're about. It's just a street. We

all have the same needs and wants and desires and so we are a neighborhood.

KAPLIN: I'd like to move on to your post-law school career. You mentioned that you were Assistant Counsel for Housing and Urban Development. What did that job entail?

COHEN: It was a terribly boring job and I only stayed there for about a year and a half. It was filling out forms. It started out actually as the Public Housing Authority. And, then, was merged into the newly created cabinet level position of Department of Housing and Urban Development. It was dreadfully boring. Really boring.

KAPLIN: Did you enjoy being Assistant Counsel for the Philadelphia School District?

COHEN: That was terrific. It was in the Richardson-Dilworth era and they changed the complexion of the school board. It was wonderful. It was challenging. It was exciting. We went through everything. We had a riot at 21st and the Parkway, at headquarters. Frank Rizzo was, at the time the police chief. I did a lot of tax work, a lot of tax litigation. I did a lot of the truancy issues. I defended teachers in court when they were attacked by students. It was, I was on the ground floor of the Title I funding and all the different federal Titles coming. I did lots of litigation. It was very, very exciting. Those were times when education was changing; when we realized we were falling behind other countries and it was such a variety. I wrote legislation then. Some laws are still in effect now. It was just a very, very exciting time to be at the school board.

KAPLIN: When you hear attacks on the Philadelphia School District today, does it hearken you back to a time when you worked for the school district? And perhaps feel that you should defend the school district or are you hoping for greater change in the Philadelphia School District?

COHEN: Simi, I would rather put it in terms of, I'm very, very supportive of number one, public education, and number two, making sure that all of our children receive not just adequate education, but the very best that we can possibly give them. And that's what I'm supportive of rather than defending attacks or anything like that. We have to concentrate on public education and making our public schools the very best they can be both in the suburbs and in the city and do whatever it takes to make sure that that's what we get.

KAPLIN: Moving on to your business career. You got your start in business as president of a business that wholesale gems?

COHEN: Right. Rocks, gems and mineral specimens.

KAPLIN: How did that come about especially from your career in public service and law?

COHEN: I was home mothering at the time and really itching to do something that wouldn't require me to be away from my children. My dearest friend lived in New Jersey and she was in the same position. And, we started researching and just decided that we could wholesale and buy rocks, and gem, and mineral specimens and go to different community bazaars and holiday sales and we could take our kids and we could be together, because we missed each other. We were good friends, and it was a good way to spend time together. We hooked up with a jewelry maker, so we had wonderful jewelry made from the agates and the stones. But, the first thing we did was we went to the library and got every book there was on these stones and became experts on knowing what there were. And it was fun, because it was a whole new world and just something to learn. And, it was an opportunity to learn business, really from the ground up. And, to be with my friend and take my children. And my kids used to sit and really would spread everything out in our living rooms. All of our children would go. And my children, at very young age, could tell you, could point to a quartz, and to all the other stones. It really was a very educational experience for all of us.

KAPLIN: How did your career turn back into the law? You mentioned that you were counsel at WWDB, a station which I still listen to.

COHEN: Ok. Yes. WWDB and WHAT were family owned. And when my favorite Uncle Billy that I mentioned before, he owned the stations, and he became ill and at the time, my baby was in a full day kindergarten and I was looking for something to do where I could still be home if anybody had a sore throat and I could ride the bus on the class trip when they needed a mother to accompany the class trip. So, it was just ideal for me to go to the radio station and make my own hours.

KAPLIN: But, then that...

COHEN: It grew.

KAPLIN: It grew.

COHEN: It grew.

KAPLIN: It grew a lot from your resume.

COHEN: Yes. It grew into my not only being General Counsel but also the COO and Executive Vice President. And then, when my uncle died, it kind of fell on my shoulders.

KAPLIN: Well, your resume states that you worked for three radio companies; Independence and Bank Broadcasting Companies, Orange Productions, and, finally, Lita Cohen Radio Service. How were these jobs different?

COHEN: One lead into the other. Independence and Banks Broadcasting were the owners of the two radio stations, that's just their legal title. And I worked with an air personality who did a Sinatra show. And when we would go to radio conventions, people would always say, "Why don't you syndicate the Sinatra show?" And we said, "Well, we don't know anything about radio syndication." And then I just made the decision, well, we don't know anything about it but we're smart enough not to make the same mistake twice. So, let's form Orange Productions, which we did. And I was the President of Orange Productions and we syndicated a Sinatra radio program and out it on almost 200 station, over 200, 280 radio stations throughout the country. And, indeed, we did make almost every mistake there was to make, but only once. And we were very, very successful in that enterprise, but after five years I decided that I wanted to expand and go into other programs. So I left Orange and formed Lita Cohen Radio Services, an apt name, and started syndicating other radio programs. Some of which I owned, some of which I was just the syndicator. And, did that for several years.

KAPLIN: Now, how did you choose which programs that you would syndicate? Were you a big Frank Sinatra fan? Was it personal taste or was it more from business perspective- this is what the audience is really looking for?

COHEN: Well, the Orange Productions was only Sinatra. I decided, other people had come to me and asked to syndicate. I realized that I had to do it on my own. And, I never solicited to syndicate programs, any program that I did handle, people came to me and asked me to do it, because, at that time, I was known in the industry. And, so I syndicated. a lot of different

people. The show that I owned was a Big Band show. And, that was very exciting.

KAPLIN: I actually last weekend was visiting my grandparents and went to Big Band show with them. And they kept telling me what a big influence it had on them and on my father. Did Big Band have a big influence on you? Was that music of your time, before your time, after your time?

COHEN: It was a little bit before my time, although I remember my parents listening to that kind of music. But, for me, I can't do anything on a purely business basis. If I'm going to do something, I'm going to become totally immersed in it. So, just as I did with the rocks and the gems and the mineral specimens, I researched the Big Bands and learned as much as I could about that era. Then I was able to syndicate properly, because I knew what I was talking about and loved every second of it. We did wonderful things. We bought out a large cruise ship, the Norway, which, at the time was the largest cruise ship in the water and sold out for a Big Band Cruise. We had 2500 people flocking to our cruise.

KAPLIN: How did your business career, I would like to move into your political career, how did your business career segway in to your political career? I know that from 1984-1992 you were a L. M. township commissioner. Was that a part-time position?

COHEN: Yes. Before that, in 1973, I was appointed to the L.M. planning commission. I was the first woman ever appointed to any commission in L.M. Then I decided that I wanted to run for township commissioner where again I could serve in a better way and have more influence at the grassroots level. So, I ran and served two terms as commissioner and then luckily the job of State Rep opened up and so there I was. I had a primary challenge, but succeeded and it was just natural, because I was always in public service and it just flowed one into the other.

KAPLIN: You seemed almost destined for public service with a legal education, a political science education, and a family that emphasized philanthropy and community service. Did you find any advantage to being a woman when you ran, or disadvantage when you ran for political office? Either the first time or as State Representative.

COHEN: My mother said to me as a child and she said it thousands of times, "Women are people too." And so, I'm a people. I didn't think that when I ran there were "women's issues."

Because when momma has breast cancer it affects the children, her husband, her parents, the neighborhood, her relatives, her job, her employer. It affects everyone, so I didn't really think that there were "women's issues." I don't think that there are positives or negatives about being a woman, because I really my whole life worked in a man's world. Wherever I was; practicing law, in law school, in the radio business, it was a man's world and it never, after awhile it didn't hit me when I walked into a room that I would be the only woman in the room. I'm a people, I'm a person. So we're all there to do whatever job it is we're there to do. What I have found since I'm a representative is that indeed women touch subjects that men heretofore never did. No one ever dealt with breast cancer and interestingly, no one ever dealt with prostate cancer until the women became health care activists. So, I don't like to generalize men and women because we're people, but I think it's a reality that's there.

KAPLIN: I read some of the newsletters that you send out to the constituents and some of them have had questionnaires about community and certain legislation. How have the questionnaires affected either your voting in the House or proposing legislation?

COHEN: Oh, it's been a tremendous effect. I do my questionnaires. I sometimes sit at nights or weekend, or even during the day and just get a list and start calling constituents. And I knock on doors all year round, and I do it constantly. And, I'm in the neighborhood and I talk to people. They stop me, or I stop them. When I'm pumping gas, if someone pulls up, I just start talking to them, because I know they're neighbors and I want hear about them. All of that has a tremendous effect on what I do. This is a representative form of government. All 58,000 of my constituents can't sit on my lap in Harrisburg. I'm their voice. I represent them and their views. Their hopes, their dreams, their desires. And its up to me to be their voice out there and do what they want me to do, and I take that very, very seriously.

KAPLIN: So what then happens if your conscience differs from the voice of your constituents?

COHEN: I asked that of my predecessor when I first ran. And that's always been a concern. It has not yet happened. In eight years, it has not yet happened. Because, I think, if it were something so egregious, that the majority of my constituents wanted me to go one way, and my conscience so

strongly said that I should do something else, I don't think that I would really be a true representative of these people. It has never happened in eight years. And, I hope that as long I am there, it never does.

KAPLIN: Your record indicated that you are in favor of certain types of gun control, in favor of gay rights, hates crimes legislation, funding for the arts and contraceptive equality. These are not areas in which many people associate the Republican Party with being supportive. So, why are you a member of the Republican Party? I also noticed your bumper sticker "Republicans for Religion in our lives, not in our laws."

COHEN: Right. I serve the people. I'm a Republican, because I think that the Republican philosophy says that government should only act when people can't help themselves and at that point government should step in. You've used the term "gun control." I don't like that, "sensible gun laws. " Because I have hunters, collectors, and sportsman in my district. I will go to the mat to protect them and to protect their rights, because these are responsible people. They're not the people that I'm directed toward. I want to take guns out of people, bad people who do bad things with guns. That's what my philosophy. Contraceptive equality is only the right thing to do. It's only right. If an employer provides prescription coverage for its employees, it shouldn't discriminate against women. If its covering Viagra, it should cover... and it's only sensible, because it saves money in the long run, it's economically a benefit to employers to provide contraception equality. And, again, I don't like using the term "gay rights." The answer, the way I would respond, is that we should not discriminate against people because they are different. That's why, I have been, for many years, the prime sponsor of legislation that will make actual or perceived sexual orientation a hate crimes and a protected area just as race, religion, national orientation, etc. So, I guess, I'm a people person, I want to do what's right, what's fair, what's just for the people that I represent in the 148th District and all the people of the Commonwealth. And that's what counts, rather than labels.

KAPLIN: Well, you've also worked, you've also sponsored the Pennsylvania Firearms Trafficker Prevention Act with State Representative Dwight Evans.

COHEN: Yes.

KAPLIN: Who's a Democrat. Do you often work with representatives from the proverbial other side of the aisle?

COHEN: Of course! Actually, being the prime sponsor of the anti-trafficking gun bill, Mayor Rendell had called me into his office and asked to me to be the prime sponsor of the bill. And, I have worked with members of the quote other side, because my goal, is not party labels. My goal is to do the right thing. And this bill was to stop gun-running and gun trafficking.

KAPLIN: You are the Chair of the Task Force on Domestic Relations. How did you gain this position and what does the job entail being the Chair?

COHEN: A lot of work is what it entails, but its good work and it's important. I'm a member of the judiciary, the judicial, the judiciary committee. And, I was appointed by the speaker to chair this task force. This is something I've been working on for four, five, six years. Almost everyone in Pennsylvania, all 12 million of us are touched by divorce, if not ourselves, our parents, our cousins, our friends, or employees, our, people we know, and children particularly. And the system isn't working right. I have worked with, spoken to, interviewed, had letters from, emails, telephone calls from thousands and thousands of, literally, people who've been done in by the system. It simply isn't working. And, I have now put in two House Bills, 1976 and 1977. 1976 will require a constitutional amendment which hopefully will be on the ballot in the Spring of 2001 which will enable the legislature to act to change the court system to make the court system, if you will, "divorce friendly." It won't make us a quickie divorce state. It will just bring justice to people who are unhappy in their personal lives and once they go to court and once they're in the system, if they thought they were miserable before, as they say, "They ain't seen nothin' yet" until they get in to the court system. And it doesn't work. Some jurisdictions it does. Some jurisdictions are terrific. But, generally speaking, people are suffering. And, my goal is to make a painful situation, the break up of a marriage, and that's painful, when they deal with the government, we shouldn't exacerbate that situation. And, so, that's what we want to do.

KAPLIN: So, does this legislation hope to streamline the court system or?

COHEN: It will make it more efficient. Essentially, it's one family, one judicial team. So that, within six months, we hope

to wrap up every issues, every issue will be heard. Whereas now, custody, equitable distribution, support, all the other issues, they're all heard separately. You have to take a day off from day jillions of time to go tell your story to different people. And, our poor children have to go to court so many times and tell their same sad story to strangers several times. And that's just not fair. It's not right.

KAPLIN: You're a member of many committees in the House.

COHEN: Yes.

KAPLIN: Do you have one of which you are particularly fond that you enjoy working on the most?

COHEN: Well, I'm a member of the elite Appropriations Committee. That's very exciting, because we in the House are responsible to initiate revenue bills. We're responsible for crafting, right now it's an almost 20 billion dollar budget. So, that's an awesome responsibility which I take very, very seriously.

KAPLIN: Has your work in business aided you on the Appropriations Committee?

COHEN: Yes. Absolutely. Although government isn't and shouldn't be run as a business. Because businesses look at the bottom line and our bottom line is serving the people. So, sometimes, we have to spend money in business, in government rather. In business you look for a return, our return is a human return. And that's different in business. But, in crafting a budget, many aspects of business appear in crafting a 20 billion dollar budget.

KAPLIN: As a member of the Appropriations Committee, do feel any tension between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia? In the media, there is a perception that in Pennsylvania there are two major urban centers and they're constantly fighting for attention, for money, for a number of things? Have you come in, run across this in you experience?

COHEN: As a member of the Appropriations Committee, I have to think about the entire state. I've never seen Philadelphia and Pittsburgh competition. And don't forget, we're a rural state. Our major industry is agriculture. So, there's rather than, east vs. west, the tensions are rural, urban, suburban. And how we put such a diverse economy and diverse population to an efficient functioning of government.

KAPLIN: How do your personal interests affect your political interests? For example, you've been lauded for your support of funding for the arts, was this due, in part, to your participation in radio? Or, perhaps, from your childhood, a particular focus on arts in your family?

COHEN: It has nothing to do with radio. It has to do with providing as much as we can to everyone and this is, the arts are a very important contribution to our well being. Society's well being. So that's why I think it's very important. For example, when of the best honors, one of the most touching honors I've ever had, a few years ago after I got an amendment to the budget, to provide more funding for the arts, the children, I was invited to a concert in my honor and various children performed. And, there were some special needs kids. And, I'm a big supporter of funding for projects for special needs people. And these children from Kencrest sang and I was told that these were children who never talked before. Could not talk. And by participating in these programs and music it makes it easier for them, these children are now verbal, and they're singing and they're communicating through music. So, funding for the arts is critical.

KAPLIN: You've mentioned throughout this interview, that you view yourself first as a person and then as a woman. Is that correct estimation?

COHEN: Yes, well, women are people too. So, that's what we are.

KAPLIN: I can't help but ask if your gender has played a role in your political ideals or your political career.

COHEN: Sure, it has. Oh course it has, because as a woman, I experience things that are different from experiences that men have. And it all works together. My mother is a senior citizen. Actually, I'm a senior citizen and pretty soon there will be four generations of us, because my daughter is going to have a baby. Every generation, I'm experiencing and touching and so, I think that makes me a better legislator and better able to serve.

KAPLIN: You've also been active in many Jewish organizations, and I was wondering if religion has played a role in your political life.

COHEN: Absolutely, because I think what I've learned, particularly at home, my religious training teaches me, taught me about ethics and morality and justice and fairness. I'm not saying that Judaism gives more than any other religion, but this is what I learned, this is how I learn and it affects every thing that I do. Because, it's really the ethics and the morality of the situation; of what is right and wrong.

KAPLIN: Being a state representative entails non-legislative duties, such as ribbon cutting ceremonies, perhaps sponsoring little league teams, what do you enjoy about these events?

COHEN: Its touching the people. It is physically touching the people. Shaking hands, going into their homes. It is the best part of this job. I never would have in any other job been exposed to such a diverse group of people. My district is not homogeneous. It is very different. And, I don't know where else I could have had these experiences and sometimes, well, it gets me the opportunity to be with people and talk to them and fell them know that they are doing. And just having extraordinary experience; sitting in the back of a convertible waving in a parade. In a couple of weeks, I'm throwing out the first ball of the little league. Next week, I'm judging a cookie contest. That means I'll have to eat 32 cookies, talk about sugar shock. Tomorrow, we've put a team together and its everybody in this office. We've put two teams, bowling teams together, and we're going to bowl for the benefit of Big Brothers/Big Sisters. And, actually, I'm going to bowling with my left hand, because I just had carpal tunnel surgery on my right hand. But, we're bowling, it's going to be fun. We've put together two teams, the women in the office and our spouses, boyfriends, significant others. One of my former legislative aides and his wife. So, these are the things that are real fun. And we've challenged another representative, whose put together a team, so this is real serious stuff. But, its, we've gotten pledges, we're collecting money for Big Brothers/Big Sisters, so we'll fun, but we're doing it for a very worthy cause. And, these are the things that I love best about my job is just walking up and down the street, knocking on doors, going to schools. I love working with the kids in schools. That's the best part of the job.

KAPLIN: That answers my next question. Is it difficult to balance your time between Harrisburg, the local office, the non-legislative activities, your personal life?

COHEN: (laughing) What's a personal life? Its, it isn't difficult, because I just love this job. I love what I'm doing, so it's not difficult. I've learned to be in two places at once. That's doable. I have not yet learned to be in three places at once. It is doable. But, when I facetiously said, what's a personal life? I'm very fortunate. My husband is very, very supportive. Really supportive of what I do. And sometimes, when I have three places to be at once, sometimes, he does fill in for me. And he's been just wonderful.

KAPLIN: Do you have any aspirations to run for national office?

COHEN: Absolutely not.

KAPLIN: Why not?

COHEN: Because, the farther up you go, the less you touch people. And, Washington is very far away from the 148th Legislative District. And you don't get the opportunity in Washington to touch people as much, to be here and know everybody. When I was a commissioner, I had 5000 constituents. I knew absolutely everybody, where they lived and their grandmothers' birthday. Now, I have 58000 people and its more difficult to know everyone, let alone their grandmother's birthday. When you go to Washington, your area is much larger, the issues are less personal, and its not a place where I'd want to be.

KAPLIN: Public service and philanthropy, I'd like to move on to the philanthropic aspects of your life, because it seems to play a very large role. You're a member of a number of philanthropic organizations. Do you have a favorite? Or, a few favorites?

COHEN: I only get involved and embark upon projects that I know that I'll love, that I know that I can give my all, 110%, and do. So, that everything I do is very touching and very, very significant, very important to me.

KAPLIN: In 1992, you created Cohen C.A.R.E.. The Community Advisory Reinvestment Effort, to which you donate 10% of your annual salary to fund local...

COHEN: At least. At least 10%.

KAPLIN: At Least. How did that project evolve and can you tell me about the project?

COHEN: Well, it's a very exciting project. It really evolved because my husband made the suggestion. I was in a very tight primary race, and my husband said, "Well, why don't you pledge to give 10% of your salary back?" And I said, "Ok." And everyone said, "That's crazy. You can't do that. That's insane." And I said, "Well, I made the promise. I keep the promise." And it's worked out tremendously. It is so significant, because I don't make the decision about where the money goes. It is truly a community advisory. And, elected officials in the five municipalities that I represent, they have no say in it. It is the community people that make the suggestions. And they meet and they tell me where the money should go. And I have given, in the eight years that I have been a representative, oh my, I've given, 60, 70 thousand dollars to community projects that wouldn't be funded otherwise.

KAPLIN: What kind of projects has the endowment funded?

COHEN: Benches in parks, in the community centers. Windows, doors at community centers, banners. There's a sign at Miles Park in Whitmarsh. I've donated microphones, portable microphones for police and community to use at various events. Oh, we've done innumerable things. Helped fix up a Boy Scouts house. I gave my money, one year to a bridge that had been closed in Lower Merion, but we made it into a pedestrian bridge. And the neighbors and the school children came out and cleaned it and painted it. We cleaned it, we painted it, put plants on it to make it nice and pretty and safe for people to walk. All different kinds of things.

KAPLIN: It seems as though that project is also a way to encourage your constituents to be involved in the political process. What other ways have you encouraged political involvement?

COHEN: It's a two way street, political involvement. I talk to my constituents. And sometimes they'll call and they'll say, "We have this problem!" And I will counsel them, "Well, go to borough or township meetings. Write letters. If necessary, march. Make calls, whatever it takes. You need to get involved. And if you my need guidance, I will, and I've spoken to many citizen groups and told them how to lobby, what to do to get their point across. And that's what's so wonderful about being so close to the community, because democracy is truly the best and, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, its cumbersome, its slow, its clumsy, but it's the best there is, the best in

history that anyone's ever had. Where to ordinary citizen can go and have a voice and be heard and win.

KAPLIN: We've talked about philanthropy being a tradition in your household. Do you see philanthropy as a tradition among your colleagues in the House of Representatives as well?

COHEN: Some of them. I think that they're all there to do the right thing for their constituents. Some are more involved than others.

KAPLIN: What advice would you give to law students interested in a political career today?

COHEN: Go for it.

KAPLIN: Go for it?

COHEN: Go for it! Absolutely! Make this world a better place.

KAPLIN: Well, I think that wraps up my questions. I'd like to thank you for..

COHEN: Oh my pleasure.

KAPLIN: For honoring me with your..

COHEN: Oh thank you. I'm thrilled to do this.

KAPLIN: And, I'll let you see a copy of the paper that I write.

COHEN: Wonderful