DICK POSTHUMUS

Interviewed by
Steve Mitchell

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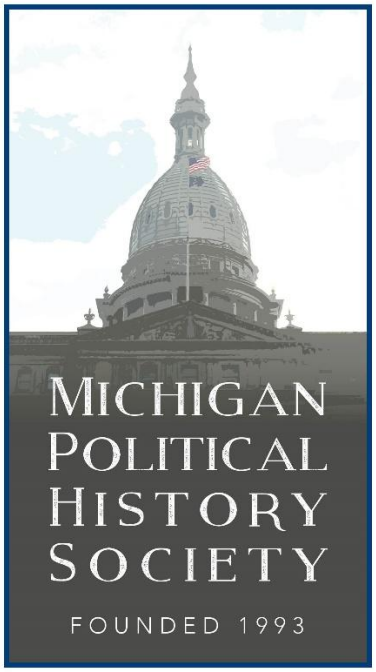

Steve Mitchell:

Hello, I'm Steve Mitchell, and today I'm interviewing for the Michigan Political Historical Society, Michigan's longest serving Senate majority leader, a former lieutenant governor, and a former chief of staff to yet another governor. And that's Dick Posthumus. Good morning, Dick. And let me ask you, what was it like? Where were you born and how was it growing up?

Dick Posthumus:

Well, I was really blessed. I grew up on a farm in West Michigan, about 30 miles southeast of Grand Rapids. And that really was outside of my faith in my family. The first love of my life was being outdoors and on the farm. I had a great family. I was very fortunate, and it was a great extended family. My mother's family would get together every Sunday at the church we went to. And so, I'd see all of them on Sunday morning, Sunday afternoon. All my dad's brothers and sisters and their kids would all get together on our farm, so I'd see them. So, we had just this great growing up on the farm. My grandfather lived on the farm just about a hundred yards from our home. And my dad started working off the farm about the year I was born in a local grain elevator.

And so I spent a lot of time with my grandfather, and he had a lot of impact on my entire life. He was a disabled veteran from World War I, and he always had this interest in what was going on in the world for some reason. Because none of our family had been involved in the political world or anything like that until I ran. But I spent a lot of time with him. First of all, my mother used to say that when I was two or three, I would walk across the path in the field about a hundred yards to his house and my grandma and grandpa's house, and I'd spend a lot of, all day with him and then come home at night. And as I was growing up, he would take me out on the tractor, set me between his legs. And so I'd be out there all day. And I guess that's where I learned my ... I just loved to watch the dirt being turned, the wheat being harvested, the hay being harvested.

And maybe that's where I learned my love for farming. And I did that until probably I was 10 or 12 till I could drive the tractor myself. And at the same time, because he was a disabled veteran, as he aged, he couldn't work all day. And so we would work an hour or two and then he'd go in the house. He had been mustard gas, so he had breathing problems. And during that time in house, he would talk about what was going on in the world. He'd talk about the past. And he was a typical old Dutch Republican. And so I'd learned all this Republican stuff very early in my life. And that's probably why I became the conservative Republican with traditional values that I am. And so that went on for most of my life. As I was growing up, and as I say, right from the beginning, I had both this love of the outdoors and agriculture and this love for state affairs and world affairs.

Steve Mitchell:

When you start to do something as a young person that has such an influence on what you're going to be, and clearly that relationship with your grandfather was an important one, because it reinforced not only your love for farming, but your love for Republican Party politics. He must have been quite a guy.

Dick Posthumus:

He was. I mean, I was very fortunate. Both all my grandparents, my mother's mother who was at our church, had a lot of influence. Our church, I belonged to Church of the Brethren, which is kind of a cousin to Mennonites. And so I grew up with this view of simplicity. We believed in simplicity, kind of living as close to Jesus would live. But on the other hand, while that was sort of a conservative view in today's world, it also had what would be viewed as liberal views in today's world. It was very active in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Like the Mennonites are basically pacifists. And so I learned this

view that war was not a good thing. And so that had a lot of influence on me as well. And so it was kind of a dichotomy because I had this influence from my mother's mother, from the church, and yet I had more of this Calvinistic view from my Dutch grandparents. And so I had to weigh that. And both of those impacted sort of later in my life as I viewed public policy.

Steve Mitchell:

It was a small church too, wasn't it? Physically small and not a lot of members?

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah, we had about a hundred people every week and probably half of those were related to me in some way.

Steve Mitchell:

How many siblings did you have?

Dick Posthumus:

I had three siblings. I had two older sisters and a younger brother.

Steve Mitchell:

And did either or any of them get involved in politics?

Dick Posthumus:

No, none of them were directly involved at all. They were interested. They've always been interested in the political world, but again, showing how our youth have an impact. My younger brother who's retired recently has just started his world in becoming a pastor in Florida. So in his retired life, in the same church, in Church of the Brethren.

Steve Mitchell:

Now, where did you go to high school? Where did you go to grade school?

Dick Posthumus:

Well, that was very unique for my time period. I was probably one of the last, if not the last legislator in Michigan, go to a one room schoolhouse. I went there in the late '50s and early '60s. We had a one room schoolhouse that was basically right across the road from us. We had nine grades, kindergarten through eighth grade. I had three kids in my class, and actually it was the same school that my dad and his siblings went to as they were growing up. Well, I think it was at the end of my second grade year, as the world was changing and people moved to the town in the post World War II era, there were not enough kids in this rural community to go to that rural school. So that school closed down. And so we ended up going to another one room schoolhouse down the road about two miles.

And I did that until fifth grade. And then later finished my elementary and high school terms in Caledonia. And that's where I went to high school, which also had some formative effects on me.

Steve Mitchell:

Going back to your high school years, I presume somebody who would ultimately have the positions you had who have done a lot of different extracurricular activities. What did you do in high school?

Dick Posthumus:

Well, I loved sports. I played football, I wrestled, I played baseball, but football was probably my favorite sport. And I was running back and enjoyed it a lot. Had pretty good record my senior year. And I always said that back then, after I graduated, I wasn't good enough to play in college, but good enough to be all conference in high school. But I always said that I'd give up six months of my life at the end of my life to play one more night of football. Well, as I get closer to the end of my life, now it's down to ... Well, I'd maybe give up one week of my life.

Steve Mitchell:

And how many yards did you, how many yards-

Dick Posthumus:

I think it was about 600 yards I got that senior year.

Steve Mitchell:

That's pretty impressive because probably about an eight-game season in those days.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah. Yeah.

Steve Mitchell:

You were a very good runner. What other activities in high school had an impact on you?

Dick Posthumus:

Probably the most important other activity I was involved in was agricultural education and the extracurricular program tied to that called FFA. At that time, it was called Future Farmers of America. Now it's called the FFA because it's much broader in the broad-based agriculture and landscape training. But the great thing about the FFA programs is they had a lot of leadership programs. And they were really leadership contests. Parliamentary procedure, you would compete with schools throughout Michigan, what they called Farm Forum, which was sort of a discussion, public speaking, demonstration. And all these things helped really young people learn to think on their feet, to speak, and develop leadership. It's why FFA even today is one of the premier youth organizations in the country. And in fact, because of that, and maybe ... I mean, I don't know whether it comes first, the chicken or the egg, but the vocational agriculture teacher, an FFA advisor was a person by the name of Bill Harrison.

And Bill, I can say without a doubt, had more impact on me other than anybody in my family. And it was about developing sort of leadership approaches. He was a very moral and ethical person, taught about ethics. And so we were friends throughout the rest of our life as a result of that.

Steve Mitchell:

That's an amazing relationship with him. And he obviously did a pretty good job since you're one of the most ethical people that I've ever met Dick.

Dick Posthumus:

Okay. By the way, I might mention in one of those leadership contests, I was the chairman of the parliamentary procedure contest when I was a sophomore. And we were competing. Again, we compete in a district, just like sports, you compete in the district, regions, and then the state. And I think we were in the districts who were competing and I didn't know it at the time, but one of the other teams was from a little school called Beale City. And I ran into a ... I met but didn't know who the guy was. I met a guy who was a chairman. He was a senior at that time, chairman of Field Cities Contest. It was a guy by the name of John Engler. And I had no idea that I was going to meet him later on, and that would have a major impact in my political career.

Steve Mitchell:

That is a very, very small world, which brings us to another activity that you participated in. And that of course is a Boys State, Wolverine Boys' State. Tell us about that experience.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah. I guess that was my first real experience as a youth that's something involved in the political world. The American Legion sponsors a program every year. I think they still do it called Boys State and they have Girls State. And it's a program where you, at that time you came to Michigan State. Every hall in a dorm that you were assigned to was like a city or a township, and then they were all part of a county. And then you'd run for state rep, state Senate. They had attorney general, governor, and they'd have all this happen in a week and you'd develop policy. I happened to run for the Senate for several counties that I was in. Happened, I was fortunate to win and then ran and became Senate majority leader. So maybe that was a foreshadowing of what was to come later on.

Steve Mitchell:

It was your destiny to be the Senate majority leader as still the longest serving one in Michigan history. So that is an incredible little tidbit of information to have as you move forward. How did you get involved finally into, beyond just high school and beyond those activities? How did you get involved in real party politics as a young man?

Dick Posthumus:

Well, when I went to Michigan State, at that time, I had been elected president of the Michigan Association of FFA. And I would go around the state speaking to different groups. And one of the groups I spoke to was the Michigan Cattleman's Association, and the president of that group was a guy by the name of Matt Engler. And after I spoke-

Steve Mitchell:

I would think that name is familiar. I think he's got a son that you had also met.

Dick Posthumus:

Yes, yes, yes, exactly. And so after I spoke, he came up to me and he said, "My son's going to Michigan State also, and he's the president of Shaw Hall." And I said, "Well, I live in Shaw Hall." And he said "You ought to get to know him." So I don't know, sometime a month or so later, I met John and John happened to be in the same ... We were both majoring in agricultural economics.

We happened to live in the same dorm. We just met. We didn't have any close relationship, but about two years later when he was a senior, I think it was at the end of my sophomore year, it was at the end of his senior year, he came up to me and he said, "I'm going to run for state representative." I said, "You're 21 years old. You're going to run for ... "Yeah, I'm going to run for state representative and I'd like to have some people help out. Do you want to help in the campaign?" And at the time we were in a recession. I didn't have a job for the summer. I said, "Sure." So I'd get up in the morning, I'd do chores at the farm and then I'd drive up. It was in Montcalm and Isabella County. I'd drive up there and I ended up managing his campaign and that was the beginning.

And in the end, John ran against a 14-year incumbent and in the end, he won by 134 votes. And so it really taught me that every little thing you can do, every little contact, you can make a difference, that one person can make a difference. And so that kind of excited me to the whole political world. After that, I went back to school, was continuing in school, but then later on there was a youth movement throughout the political world. This was in the early '70s. We had what was called the age of majority when they reduced the age to be an adult from 21 to 18 and people, young men were going off to Vietnam, young women off to Vietnam. And they thought, well, if these young men and women could fight at the age of 19, they ought to be able to vote and have the other opportunities of an adult.

And so the age majority passed, the adulthood would move to 18. And so the political party said, "We got to do something to help attract young people to our party." The Republican Party created a position in their state party called the Third Vice Chairman. And so John Engler at the time, I was still going to school. He was in the legislator, and said "Hey, this new position was created, and you really had this way of bringing young people into our campaign. You ought to run for it." So, John helped me. I ran for third vice chairman, and I met a number of people who I later was associated with in the political world. One of those was Spence Abraham, who later became the United States Senator for Michigan. And we ran against each other and I beat him by one vote.

Steve Mitchell:

There's a term, a high tide raises all boats. And when you think about here are these two small town farm kids, you and John Engler, Spence Abraham from East Lansing. And all three of you, I suspect, throughout your lives, pushing each other higher and higher. John becomes the longest serving governor in Michigan history. You become the longest serving majority leader, a lieutenant governor and chief of staff to another Governor and Spence becomes a U.S. Senator and Secretary of Energy. I mean, three young kids going all that way back and who went to the top because I suspect y'all kept pushing each other higher and higher to get to those positions.

Dick Posthumus:

Well, we certainly did. I mean, we all worked together and Spence and I, after this race, became good friends. And so all three of us, along with a number of other people, just worked together to try and make a difference in Michigan.

Steve Mitchell:

Was it as youth chair that you had an opportunity to vote for the vice presidential candidate in the convention?

Dick Posthumus:

Yes. In 1972 at the presidential convention, I was selected as one of the delegates being a party leader, a third vice chairman of the party. This was the year Nixon was running for reelection, and his vice

president was Agnew. And at the time, I was a supporter of Nixon, but I didn't like Agnew. I didn't care for him. I thought his ethics were a little bit questionable. I thought he didn't understand young people. And so I refused to vote for Agnew. And that was a little bit of a problem because at that time, Governor Milliken and the leadership of the party had really pledged to Nixon that they would deliver a hundred percent vote for his vice president. And so I refused to vote, but I wasn't going to raise a big fuss. So they basically pulled me out of the vote, put in a sub, actually it was my state Senator Bob VanderLaan to vote so that they could get a hundred percent vote.

And there was actually an article in the paper about my refusal to vote. And it wasn't meant again to be a rebellious thing. It was just my ethics didn't care or there was something about him. And I think later on it proved to be the case, as he was forced to resign from the vice presidency because of those ethics.

Steve Mitchell:

That's right. In October of 1973, right during the pitch war of the Israeli war in 1973 and in October, Agnew resigns the vice presidency because he took bribes as governor of Maryland. So young Dick Posthumus had a pretty good barometer as to what is the right type of politician to be. And that was very interesting ... And that standing up for yourself there and then being right had to have an impact on your future career and sticking with your values, I presume.

Dick Posthumus:

Huge impact. At first, it really turned me off to the political world. After this, it was about 1972. I graduated from college. I got married to my wife, Pam. And I started my farm. So I started off and kind of separated myself a little bit from the political world. I thought, well, why can't I just vote the way I believe as opposed to this political pressure? It was a little naive, but it also taught me that a person can stand up for themselves and survive. But it did lead me off into another world for a little while.

Steve Mitchell:

And what was that world that you went into after that?

Dick Posthumus:

Well, as I mentioned, I majored in agricultural economics and my other love other than the political world was farming. And so I began farming. We bought a farm. We started a farm. And I also went to work for an agricultural trade association called the Farmers and Manufacturer Sugar Beet Association.

Worked for them for a few years and then went to work for the Michigan Beef Industry Commission. And so that lasted for about six years. And as I was developing the farm, as Pam and I were beginning to settle in, in our family, but then in 19, I think it was about 1978, John decided to run for the state Senate from the House against another incumbent. And he'd asked if I would come and help him out. So I took a leave of absence from my job as Executive Vice President of the Michigan Beef Industry Commission and went up and helped him on the campaign. Fortunately, he won. And then he suggested that I should go to work for the House of Representatives to see ... Because at that time, the Michigan Republicans, this was following Watergate and the era when I think Republicans were not doing well throughout the country.

And if I remember right, out of the 110 representatives, we may have only had 38 Republicans. It wasn't very many. And so they were trying to regain the majority. A young legislator from Holland by the name of Paul Hillegonds, who later became Speaker of the House 10, 15 years later. His role was to try and rebuild that majority. And so they asked me to come to work for him. I came to work for him and did

that. That's when you and I met, hired you to come and help us do that. And we began our march towards the majority.

Steve Mitchell:

And it was quite a march indeed at that time. Yes, 1979 you hired me. At a Michigan State homecoming football game.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah.

Steve Mitchell:

A Michigan State Michigan game. And we both had too many pops and that's probably why I got hired.

Dick Posthumus:

I don't think so.

Steve Mitchell:

All right. Going back to that. But you ran that campaign, you started working with the House, and then that led to a close relationship with one of the candidates with whom your wife worked.

Dick Posthumus:

Right. Pam was the administrative assistant to Senator Jack Welborn from Kalamazoo, who was one of the most conservative senators at the time. And if we should step back, remember that following Agnew's resignation as a result of Watergate, Richard Nixon was forced to resign. And then my Congressman, Jerry Ford, became President of the United States in 1970. And I was a big supporter of Jerry Ford. But in 1976, Ronald Reagan, the governor of California, decided he was going to run against Jerry Ford. He was beginning this whole progressive conservative movement in the Republican Party. And Jack became his state chairman, and Pam was very much involved in that as a result. And it led to conflict with us. I said, "Pam, how can you support Ronald Reagan and Jerry Ford's our congressman?" But she did. And she really taught me something then in that she was willing to stand up for what she believed in despite all of the pressure from all of the Republicans across the state.

And I was supposed to be this Republican astute person in our family. I'd been third vice chairman, but she was the one who really stood up for beliefs. And I guess that really re-instilled the importance of standing up for what you believe in. And so I ended up getting to know him. Later, of course, Jerry Ford lost that election to Jimmy Carter. And I think it was about two years later in the gubernatorial election, Jack Wellborn ran in the primary. And because of my relationship with Jack, Jack asked me to manage his campaign. So I quit working for the House, went to work for Jack as his campaign manager for about six months. And then in the spring of '82, my state senator decided to retire, and a number of people came to me and the people I knew, not people back home, but people in Lance said, "Hey, there's this new district out here.

It was right after we apportionment that's this rural suburban district in Kent County. It really fits where you're at. You ought to run for it. " And so after I talked to a few people, I decided to run. I was clearly an underdog. It was a primary. I was running against the county treasurer who was the largest vote getter in Kent County in the preceding election.

Steve Mitchell:

And in fact, got more votes than Ronald Reagan in 1980.

Dick Posthumus:

That's correct. That's correct. And so I knew I was starting out from scratch, but I basically put together a grassroots ... I knew I couldn't get people at the top, the top leaders, the leaders of the party, the bankers. But I started out from what we would consider the bottom of the totem pole. I went to township supervisors, township clerks, fire chiefs, and board of education members. And I got those individuals to support me because of what I stood for.

And I think as a result of that, we were able to build a grassroots organization that in the end, I was very fortunate to win that race. And that was sort of the beginning of my elected political career.

Steve Mitchell:

And that also brought you into contact with a former staffer of yours who would go on to do pretty good things as well. Saul Anuzis?

Dick Posthumus:

Right. Saul, who I hired about the same time I hired you when I was working for the House, after I had decided to run, I went to talk to him to ask if he would manage my campaign. I saw the things that he was doing and like you, he was very successful at managing campaigns, and he said he would. So he quit working for the legislature, came to manage my campaign and he was only probably 19 or 20 at the time. I was 32 and we put together this grassroots campaign and we went to a lot of doors and it was his organization and our hard work and help from people like you and others that I was fortunate to win. And I think it shows, again, it taught me that it's not always the people at the top and all the top political leaders that really win elections, but it's really grassroots people that influence people at a local level. And that basically was my whole philosophy in running campaigns after that.

Steve Mitchell:

And you would use that same tactic and strategy with other candidates as I did, thank you very much, because I watched that campaign and said, "This is the way to win." And it was a way to win. And plus going door to door was an integral part of that, which everybody knows is important today as well. So, now you're 32 years old, you're a member of the state Senate. In those days, that was very young to be in the state Senate. So, what was it like in those early days being that young and having a position of that responsibility? And you replaced Bob VanderLaan, Senate majority lead.

Dick Posthumus:

Right. Well, it was both good and bad. It was good in that it was just a great learning experience, learning the responsibility of representing this quarter of a million people back in Kent County and public policy, but it was also very frustrating. 1982 saw the first Democrat elected governor of Michigan in over a decade and a half, Jim Blanchard was elected governor. The Democrats continued controlling the Senate. They controlled the Senate 20 to 18, and the Democrats continued to control the House. And so we as Republicans were a minority, but you could see there was a whole new groundswell happening. In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected, and I think he brought a whole new policy perspective to the world.

And I have to say, there's not many people I consider as political heroes. Ronald Reagan is one. I think there's no person in my lifetime other than he and Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul that's had more impact on this world than those three individuals and so it began to change Michigan, it began to change the views of the United States. And so during those early years, it was frustrating, but then again, as people were changing, Governor Blanchard proposed a huge tax increase.

People were starting to say, "Wait a minute, we want less government, not more government, less taxes, not more taxes." And the governor was able to convince his Democrat majority, the slim majority in the Senate to vote for that tax increase. The Republicans voted against it, and it caused an uprising in the blue-collar communities in this state, in particular at Oakland and parts of Oakland and Macomb County.

As a result, for the first time, I think in the history of Michigan, there was a recall of two state senators. Enough people were so angry about this tax increase, and I think people weren't seeing the new direction that was taking place in America and so there was this recall. We as Republicans wanted to stay out of it. It was up to the local people, but we also wanted to make sure that they had the help we needed and that's where you actually came into play.

We had this personal contact. I suggested to you that maybe you ought to help out down there to give them some professional help, because these were just grassroots people. They knew what they believed in, but they needed political help. And I think largely with your help and their hard work and their belief, they recalled two Democratic state senators, elected two Republican state senators, and suddenly the Republicans after just two years were in the majority, 20 to 18 and that's when John Englert became the Senate majority leader and he was able to use that later to run for governor eight years later.

Steve Mitchell:

That was a fascinating time. State Senator David Serotkin from Macomb County and Phil Mastin and you're right, we did work with it and behind the scenes, the polling showed that if the parties were involved, it wouldn't do well, but there was a little more party involvement than people ever knew about and I may be finding out for the first time today that-

Dick Posthumus:

Well, certainly not direct involvement. I mean, we wanted to make sure they had professional help and that's where, but we stayed out of it.

Steve Mitchell:

I know you did, and it was a great campaign.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah.

Steve Mitchell:

And it was highly unusual because I think it was one of the first recalls of both those recalls were some of the first in Michigan history. They'd eventually changed some of the laws regarding recalls in order to do that. But I remember one of the things that you said after you took control, and that is that you never realized how irrelevant you were in the minority until you got into the majority.

Dick Posthumus:

That's true. I mean, in our former government, the majority makes most of the decisions. The minority really is a loyal opposition. Their job is to point out the problems with the majority, but you don't have a lot of impact on policy. That's determined by the majority and those elections changed the direction of Michigan for the next 40 years. The Senate remained in Republican hands right up in... There was a Republican majority right up until just a couple of years ago, until was it 2022, 2024?

Steve Mitchell:

Two, yeah.

Dick Posthumus:

From 1982 to 2022. They were in majority every single year. That's more years consecutively that the Republicans controlled the Senate than total years that the Democrats had controlled the Senate since the Civil War. So, it was very significant. It became the base by which your Republicans were able to influence policy, the basis by which John Engler eventually won the election for governor, and it certainly changed the direction of policy in Michigan for a long time.

Steve Mitchell:

Moving back just a moment. I remember when I worked for you in the House, we talked about the differences John Engler had with Bill Milliken. And of course, Bill Milliken, still the longest serving, and it will be the longest serving governor in Michigan history at 14 years, but John Engler was right behind him at 12 years serving as governor. But you always said that John felt that the only way we could take control, the Republicans could take control of the legislature was to offer a definite difference between the two as opposed to Millikan Lieutenant to be a moderate Republican, that they needed to have the difference between conservatives and liberals. Tell us about that. John had that and you had as well.

Dick Posthumus:

That was really a movement nationwide. I mean, that was what Ronald Reagan did. It really is this what I call center right policy to develop policies and present an alternative to liberal policies of big government, big corporations, more taxes and this was what Ronald Reagan did nationally. Newt Gingrich, who became Speaker of the House with John Engler, Paul Hilligans, myself and others did here in Michigan. And it really was presenting not a reactive. I think old-time conservatives were reactive and I think that's why I called it that, you can't use the word progressive anymore, because now the liberals have stolen that term, but really it was a progressive conservative approach.

It was a proactive approach to how conservative government differs from the ultra-liberal governments of the time of large taxes, larger government, more government involvement. We were presenting the alternative, let's reduce the size of government. Let's reduce taxes. And I think people responded to that. And as a result, as the Democrats were really the majority party from really about World War II until the 1980s to Ronald Reagan, the Republicans became the majority party for all practical purposes in Michigan and across the country from 1980 till today.

Steve Mitchell:

And a lot of people, historically you don't remember that, but when you go from 1932 when Franklin Roosevelt was elected until 1994 when Newt Gingrich was elected as part of this conservative movement, the Republicans controlled the House for only four years, 1946 to 1947 and 1949 to 1953 to 1955.

Dick Posthumus:

Right.

Steve Mitchell:

The Democrats had that incredible control and so for the Republicans to take control of the Senate, as they did in 1983 was really a major change in politics and John Engler and Dick Posthumus would be responsible for that for making not only Michigan a Republican state in terms of the state Senate and the governorship, but the State House and eventually the Supreme Court.

Dick Posthumus:

Right.

Steve Mitchell:

You had a big battle on another issue that's dealt with agriculture as you started in the Senate.

Dick Posthumus:

When I was the Executive Vice President of the Michigan Beef Industry Commission, this was in the late '70s, there was an accident that took place in a feed processing facility where a fire retardant chemical called PBB was mixed with feed instead of a trace mineral that was supposed to, they were in the same colored bags. And this feed as a result was spread through a lot of areas in Michigan. And at the time we were starting to see on some of these farms, cattle start to die, farm families were having sicknesses, and it finally was discovered, actually it was a farmer, he was a chemist who became a farmer from Battle Creek who discovered that it was this poison. And so as the person responsible for the beef industry, we're trying to figure out how do we get rid of this because it will destroy the market for our cattle farmers, for the beef industry.

And this was something I always remember. I went to one of the state senators. He was a veterinarian and a farmer from mid-Michigan. His name was Dick Allen and I went to him and I said, because he understood what was going on, I said, "We need to just say we're going to get rid of all PBB. We're going to make it zero."

And he taught me something. He said, "That is pragmatically impossible, because the costs for doing that are almost impossible." He said, "In government, if we believed you were going to save every single life, we would have at every intersection and overpass. There would not be any stop signs because people are killed at stop signs, but we make a practical decision that we're going to have stop signs knowing that some people are going to make mistakes." And so I thought about that a little bit and I began to realize, because and I learned none of our food is 100% pure, because it's just impossible. And that taught me a lot about the importance of being sure of what you're doing, also understanding that there's practical things that you have to weigh, because if you spend this much money in one area, you have that much less money to spend in another area.

Steve Mitchell:

And I think that was important to come back to because that was an important issue back in the late 1970s and the 1980s. So, now you're in the Senate. You and John Engler at that time still in the Senate as well, because he is the Senate majority leader and what type of a role did you play having been his campaign manager for two House campaigns and one Senate campaign?

Dick Posthumus:

Well, two roles. I became the assistant majority leader under John, and I also became the, on the exterior, the head of the Senate campaign committee. And then I served on several important committees. So, my job was to help work with the caucus, developing policy, and at the same time on the outside to work to continue to build our majority. And during that time period, we did build on that majority. We went from a 20-vote majority. I think eventually we got up to 23.

There were a number of policy issues, and I guess that's the time period where probably the three most important issues the Senate majority leader I dealt with were probably welfare reform. At that time, we had gone through 20, 30 years of increasing welfare, just giving money away. And so we said, it's important to help people, but it's also important not to be an entity that just continues their dependence, that we needed to create a system where people worked for welfare.

And so we had this whole Workfare program that really swept through the entire country and I think that change really made a big difference. Up till that point, there was always a discussion between, do you spend more money on welfare or more money on education? And we were able to say, wait a minute, we need to spend it on education and not as much on welfare and help people to help themselves, so to speak, rather than giving them fish, helping them to teach to fish. And so that was a very important movement in the state and in the country and so I'd say that it was one of the most important.

The second and maybe the single most important was our property tax reform. It was a very interesting time. Property taxes in Michigan were very high and so there was an effort to try and reduce property taxes. And I think that was one of the issues that John Engler defeated Jim Blanchard on, was on the issue of committing to reducing property taxes.

So, as a Senate majority leader, we had introduced many bills to cut the property tax about 50% at the time. The Democrats in the Senate and the House opposed that. They said about 20% and we could never come to agreement. And finally, the Democrats and the Senate decided, we're just going to test them and see. They put out a bill to do away with the property tax, nothing else, just to do away with it and I think they thought they were going to try and embarrass us and so-

Steve Mitchell:

And that motion was made by a state senator who had become quite famous.

Dick Posthumus:

... Debbie Stabenow. She was the one who was going to... There was no reason. There was no way she wanted to get rid of property taxes, but she was part of the political movement to try and embarrass the Republicans and so Paul Hillegonds and John Engler and I met after it was introduced and we decided, "We're going to take it." And then that will give us a chance. Once we get ready to start a whole new base, because also at the same time, we had a problem with how schools were funded. They were totally funded by local property taxes. So, you had in relatively wealthy districts, huge amount of money going to schools. And you had in lower income rural districts and inner urban districts, very little income and the gap at the time was about six times difference between the low spending districts and the high spend, six times! And so that was tied to the property tax department.

So, we decided, "We're going to get rid of the property tax." Yeah, we're going to vote to get it done and they thought that we'd never do it. So, we passed the bill, sent it over to the House. Everybody in the House, everybody thought that I think the Liberals saw it and the Democrats saw it. Well, the House, because at that time they were at about, I don't know, it was maybe it was 50/50 or two vote majority in

the House. They thought it'd get defeated, but instead there were a number of blue-collar Democrats, areas that later became Republican areas that voted with the Republicans to pass it and so we got rid of the property tax. We came to an agreement with the House Democrats saying, "Okay, if you vote to do this, we'll let you pass." They said, "Well, we need a replacement. We want to pass an income tax increase." But they needed the Senate to pass it.

And we said, "All right, we'll vote with you to pass the income tax increase if you vote with us, put on the ballot a sales tax increase and a cut in the income tax." And they agreed to it, because... And it was, I think, a big mistake on their part, because we knew the public supported this lower property tax and would vote for going from 4% to 6% sales tax way over the 30 or 40%, 50% increase in income tax. Well, long story short, the ballot proposal passed, the income tax went away, our property taxes went down and also part of this process was change how we funded schools. So, now the property tax, there would be a state property tax, this lower property tax rather than being a local property tax would be a state property tax, and that would fund the operations of school districts.

So we were able to bring the bottom up and the difference between the bottom and the top was only about twice as much rather than six times as much, still too much, but it made a huge difference. And I think as a result, you had more money going to rural districts and urban districts and I think that that was a major, major change and that change has lived to this day.

Steve Mitchell:

And that was a very poll driven. Very much. I mean, there's no question. There's a lot of polling on it to determine how to win.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah.

Steve Mitchell:

... and it was a brilliant strategy; it's still in effect.

Dick Posthumus:

And the other part of that, that we began funding students as a part of that change rather than schools and in the past, you sent X amount of dollars, or the schools raised X amount of dollars in property taxes, it didn't matter how many kids they had. But as a result of this, the operational funding funded students, which is the way it should be.

So, if you had 1,000 students, you got so many dollars per student and what that did was then give us the ability later to move to the next most important thing, policy change and that was leading to schools of choice and charter schools, charter public schools. The other problem we had, in my view, is that in the way the school system was, if you were a wealthy person, you could send your child to a private school, even if you live in a poor school district. If you're a middle-class person, you can move to a suburb or to an area, but if you were a low income, in particular, minorities, you were stuck with this poor school district.

And so I felt it was important. I thought it was maybe one of the most important civil rights changes of our time. We needed to give low-income families an opportunity to give their kids a better education if they so chose. And so it led to the passage of schools of choice in our public school system so that students could decide, parents could decide that they weren't stuck. They weren't held hostage by a school district. They could go to the school of their choice. It also led to the passage of the bill I

sponsored, which created public school academies, charter schools, which is a public school, but it really is separate from the government-controlled school system. And the whole idea of this is, again, you can establish these public schools in urban areas and parents, if they decided, could, out of their choice, send their kids to these charter schools.

And this has become a... I mean, it's grown where at the time people were saying, "Well, this would segregate our schools. It would become a place for middle income White kids." But it's been just the opposite. Charter schools have become a place for low-income people of all races can go and so, and it's also created competitions for public school. I'm a product of public schools, not private schools. My kids all went to public schools, so I believe in it, but our public schools, like a lot of government entities, can become closed. And by creating this competition, I think it has improved our public schools as well. So, those are the three issues that I'm the most proud of that I accomplished while a Senate majority leader.

Steve Mitchell:

Going back to that first term, in 1984, you were young, you were ambitious, you had people around you who were ambitious and one of the things you considered in '84 was a run for the US Senate.

Dick Posthumus:

John McCain was the chair of the U.S. Senate campaign committee. And he called me at home one night and said, "We'd like you to run for the US Senate." And this was in 1984 and I'd just become Senate majority leader. Very frankly, I never had a desire to go to Washington. I loved Michigan. My love was in Michigan. I loved my farm. I had a young family. My family came first throughout all this process and so I ended up telling him no.

Steve Mitchell:

In 1990 is when you ran for Senate majority, correct?

Dick Posthumus:

Right. Yeah.

Steve Mitchell:

And we talked about those periods since between 1990-1994. 1994 was the big hubbub of the changes in the proposal B, what is it?

Dick Posthumus:

Proposal A. Yeah.

Steve Mitchell:

Proposal A, yeah.

Dick Posthumus:

Yep. That was the proposal to change how he funded schools and reduce the property taxes. That was proposal A. And that I think as a result of that passage and Republican support of that, I think helped help us continue to gain ground in blue collar areas of the state that Ronald Reagan had begun to want and which continued to this day. In the past, I think people considered, since Franklin Roosevelt and the Depression, a lot of the working class neighborhoods were considered Democrats, but I think because

they tend to be economically conservative, believe in hard work and as a result, I think Republicans gained tremendous ground and as a result, probably even today may represent almost a majority of the blue collar voters in Michigan.

Steve Mitchell:

You and John, of course, were always very, very close going back to that when you met him at FFA and then of course managed his campaign, but you had a disagreement, I think, on the sales tax and the income tax during that battle with John?

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah, I mean, it was a minor disagreement, but as we were putting together the proposal, proposal A, one of the things I was arguing for was actually a cut in the income tax as part of the proposal, not just keeping it at the level that it was at, but do a cut as well as the sales tax and at the time, John initially didn't support that. He thought, "Well, let's just deal with the sales tax." But eventually I convinced him that it was a good idea. And so it really helped us in selling the proposal because not only was it a cut in property taxes, but it was a cut in the income tax as well and I think that helped garner our support across the state for proposal A.

Steve Mitchell:

In 1998, after being governor for two terms and having Lieutenant Governor Connie Binsfeld from Northern Michigan, Connie decided to retire and that opened the Lieutenant Governors. Was that a tough decision? Here you are, the most powerful Senator to become Lieutenant Governor, which is unheard of.

Dick Posthumus:

No, it was.

Steve Mitchell:

... vice president?

Dick Posthumus:

I mean, I love being Senate majority leader. It's clear you have a lot of influence in public policy, certainly more than the Lieutenant Governor. People don't realize that. They think the Lieutenant Governor is the second most powerful position in the state, but really the Senate majority leader and the speaker have much more power than the Lieutenant Governor. But at that time, I loved the state and so my goal was really to become governor of Michigan. If I was going to stay, I really believed that we were making a difference since we took control and so I knew that being lieutenant governor, one, would teach me, I'd have a learning experience about the executive branch, it would give me an opportunity to lay out policy rather than having to get the votes to pass policy, and it would be a step should John step down... Well, I knew John had to step down because we had term limits. So, it'd be a step and an opportunity for me to run for governor after four years.

Steve Mitchell:

And people don't realize who are on the outside of politics, the planning and the work that goes into thinking about and then eventually running for governor, and that's something that you did starting way

back. I mean, you had always aspired for higher office. We talked about the fact that there you are, you and John and Spence, the three guys who went on to just brilliant political careers. When did you first start working towards that idea of becoming governor?

Dick Posthumus:

I mean, it really was when I was Senate majority leader. I mean, I started thinking about it, looking at what the potential was A lot of the things I did as Senate majority leader really were complimentary to prepare yourself to run for governor, developing public policy, going out and meeting with opinion leaders throughout the state as you develop that policy across the state. Because as a senator, you only represent a quarter of a million people, but if you're going to run for governor, you got to represent 10 million people. And so you really need to let people know who you are and what you stand for. So I started that during that time period, and that continued while I was lieutenant governor as well.

Steve Mitchell:

And a lot of planning went into it.

Dick Posthumus:

Right.

Steve Mitchell:

Let me go back because we did forget to talk about a very important part of the growth of Dick Posthumus, and that is the 1988 presidential race with where you managed to deliver more delegates for Jack Kemp than Kemp got anywhere else in the United States. Tell us about that incredibly fascinating presidential election in Michigan and the fact that Michigan had an early caucus states.

Dick Posthumus:

Right. Well, in 1988 Vice President Bush was running for president, as Reagan was finishing his term. And there were also two other candidates, Robertson.

Steve Mitchell:

Pat Robertson.

Dick Posthumus:

Pat Robertson was running as a religious right supporter. And then Jack Kemp, who I believed was really carrying on the Ronald Reagan progressive conservative philosophy. And so I was a big supporter of Jack Kemp, but even though I liked George Bush Sr., I really felt Kemp represented a blue-collar district in New York, and so he understood how working people thought, and I thought that was the future of the Republican Party.

Steve Mitchell:

Former football player. Former NFL football player.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah, yeah.

Steve Mitchell:

Got his fame.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah, yeah. A former NFL football player, quarterback. And so I developed this relationship with him while I was Senate majority leader, and then I decided to support him for president. Well, Michigan's leadership led by Governor John Engler supported President Bush and many of my good friends from West Michigan supported him, and so I had a lot of pressure not to do that. But at the same time, I could see that we could develop a great campaign. And we went out, and it was really a campaign not statewide, but they had developed a caucus system where folks were chosen by district to go to caucuses and then determine who would be the candidate that they would be supported from Michigan-

Steve Mitchell:

To just provide some historical context, you couldn't have a primary earlier than the primaries that were held in New Hampshire and Iowa.

Dick Posthumus:

Right. Right. Right.

Steve Mitchell:

But you could put yourself into that first two or three or four by having a caucus. So, Michigan all of a sudden became an important player.

Dick Posthumus:

Very important.

Steve Mitchell:

And you've got Jim Carvel's wife, Mary Matalin, literally living in Michigan for a full year because of those caucuses. So this was really not just the typical campaign, but a different campaign because of those caucuses and the early nature of it. So this is a huge impact you and dueling with your former...

Dick Posthumus:

Friend.

Steve Mitchell:

Friend and still at that time, you were both still friends and ultimately you would be as lieutenant governor, but there you are for the first time against John Engler.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah. I mean, it put us at odds, but I felt I was going to, again, based on what I'd learned in my past, I was going to stand up for what I believed in. And we worked hard, and yet the political pressure came. And finally, it looked like there was going to be all kinds of controversy, and people were fighting. I mean, there was some literal fights. But it was kind of just, in my view, it was destroying... And I think

John's view, we were both, I think, had a broader picture than just his presidential election, and it was, I think, destroying, having a negative impact on the Republican Party.

So, John, as the head of the Bush campaign in Michigan and I, as the head of the Kemp campaign, we got together and we made a determination of how we would divide the delegates based on what we saw happening so that we could quit the fights. And so we put together an agreement. And as a result of that, yes, Jack Kemp got more delegates out of Michigan than any place else in the country, but-

Steve Mitchell:

Part of that battle was fighting incidentally while you were in Denmark.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah. Yeah. I was overseas. There was a little bit going on. I was being attacked while I was out of the country visiting my Danish brother, but we worked that out.

Steve Mitchell:

I remember those early morning phone calls talking about that. So it was quite a battle. And as I say, you did a great job for J. You went out to Des Moines, Iowa to meet with Kemp prior to that as well.

Dick Posthumus:

Right.

Steve Mitchell:

You had a close relationship with Kemp, did a great job for him.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah. And I think, again, as much as I love President Bush Sr., I really believe had Jack Kemp got the nomination that we would've had two terms of a Republican president rather than one.

Steve Mitchell:

As you look back on the four years you were lieutenant governor, what were you able to accomplish there working with the Governor Engler?

Dick Posthumus:

I think we were involved in a number of issues, but for me I think the biggest issue that I really felt I worked on and I think had a major impact in turning the state is actually two issues. One was we were having and still have a tremendous problem of spousal abuse across this country, and in fact, homicides as a result. And our law enforcement agencies really hadn't, in my view, caught up with the understanding. We were having spouses or significant others who had been abused going into police authorities and predominantly male police authorities were doing the interviewing and sometimes weren't either sensitive nor even understanding. And we needed to change our approach to how we dealt with spousal abuse.

And so I had held hearings throughout the state listening to women who had gone through this and local officials. And as a result, we made a number of changes in Michigan's law that made it better for those who were abused. But maybe more importantly, it raised the public's understanding of what was going

on. And I think they became more sensitized to spouse abuse and how it wasn't always handled in the right way in our law enforcement agencies, and it changed significantly, and there were a lot of leaders as this changed. So that was probably the one.

The second issue that I spent a lot of time on and felt that I had an impact on, up until this time, and even today, there's this huge cultural effort to get our kids to go to college. It was, "Are you going to college? Are you going to college? Are you going to college?" And our kids that weren't necessarily college bound were almost looked down upon if they went to trade schools or vocational schools. And having come from, although I went to college, coming from vocational agriculture, I understood the importance of vocational education. It is really, that kids aren't necessarily tied into sitting in a seat for eight hours a day, they can learn by doing things with their hands, they can learn math, they can learn all kinds of things.

And so I held hearings across the state on how to develop a stronger effort to get kids to go to trade school. And as a result of that, it became the first effort where we actually helped to provide tuition for kids who went to community colleges in trades as opposed to just college. And so those are the two areas I think I probably had the most impact on as lieutenant governor.

Steve Mitchell:

Lieutenant governor, again, not nearly as powerful, but still were able to get things accomplished even from that position as lieutenant governor. So you're running for lieutenant governor, you are lieutenant governor, and of course you're looking to 2002. Term limits came through in 1998, which means that John Engler could only serve one more term. As governor, he could serve two terms after term limits, and that term was to expire in 2002. Tell me about the 2002 campaign for governor. You ended up running against one of the strongest candidates of Democrats have ever fielded in Jennifer Granholm.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah. First of all, I knew it was going to be a difficult race. No candidate of the incumbent governor's party had won election since the new constitution, going back to 1964. In other words, if the incumbent governor were Democrat, a Democrat had never run and won. If the incumbent governor was Republican, no Republican won. It had gone on since 1964, so a half a century. So I knew it was going to be a difficult race to begin with. But yet, I felt I had built, I think, a strong support base throughout the state. People I think respected what I had done, and I had worked closely, people knew that I was somebody who could work with the other side of the aisle, even though I was a strong conservative Republican. I worked with the other side; we put stuff together. And so I knew I could have a chance.

And so we went to work and we, again, I felt, given my background, I didn't come from the suburbs. I wasn't wealthy. So my coalition to win probably couldn't be a traditional Republican coalition going to the wealthier suburbs. I went to the blue-collar areas, the Down River Detroit, Monroe County, Macomb County, the Upper Peninsula, and to rural areas. And I also knew that Jennifer Granholm coming from suburban Southeast Michigan, had support of, very frankly, a lot of these independent business people who would go either way because she was of them. And so I knew I had to do it differently.

And so we put together a campaign of, again, a very grassroots campaign going to the blue-collar counties of this state, to the rural communities, still going to the suburbs, obviously. And I'd worked hard as a farmer, but I can say in the nine months leading up to the election for governor, I don't think I've ever worked that hard in my life. It was 18 hours a day, every single day, because I was working from behind. After our primary, I had a primary that year, a good friend of mine, fellow Senator Joe Schwarz, from Battle Creek, ran in the primary against me. We won. Jennifer Granholm ran against former Governor Jim Blanchard and Congressman David Bonior, she won.

Well, after the primary, they did a poll and the poll had me at that point 24 points down, 24 points down at the middle of August. And as a result, it made it difficult to get support from the Republican Governor's Association. They thought, "Well, there's no way that this guy's going to win. They're going to direct resources to other areas." But we kept on working and we kept on building. And I think in our debates, especially the last debate, I think we won that debate. And as a result, the election kept getting closer and closer.

About a month out from the election, we had closed a 25-point margin down to about an 8-point margin, 10 to 8 point margin. But then we basically ran out of money because we had enough money in our gubernatorial campaign, but the outside sources that the independent campaigns weren't spending money like the Governor's Association. And so we had to stop spending money for about two weeks in October so that we'd have everything we could spend for the last two weeks of the election.

Well, as a result of that, it shows how important television advertising is. As a result of that, our races went from an 8, 10 point margin back out to about an 18 point, and I think it was 15 to 8 point margin. And so we were losing ground. But we started to, again, spend money. I think we had the issues on our side. And as a result, on election day, I think we lost by...

Steve Mitchell:

Three and a half.

Dick Posthumus:

Three and a half points. We, I think, were the closest Republican candidate that lost throughout the country. It appeared that... And I mean, it was going just like that. Former Lieutenant Governor, John Cherry, who was the lieutenant governor with Jennifer Granholm said they were worried that if the election had gone a week longer, that if this would've continued, they might've lost the election. But it was really a matter of money. In the end, we figured Governor Granholm spent about 14 million, all sources, we probably had about 10 to 12 million spent on our campaign and that was probably the difference.

But it was meant to be. I was disappointed. I thought here I was in Michigan. And I looked at Jennifer Granholm, born in Canada, raised in California, came here to go to the University of Michigan and then ran for governor and then after governor moved out of state again. And I was homegrown. This is where I was born and I live and I died. And I thought, why couldn't I get that across? But it wasn't my time. And I guess as a person of faith, I really determined that it was one of the best things that happened to me. Because after I lost that race for governor on election night, two years later, I was in the hospital with prostate cancer. And fortunately, they found it early. They removed the cancer. Had I been elected governor, who knows whether I would've had time where they would've found that soon enough.

So I turned around, I told my friends, I said, "This is why God had me lose the election." But that wasn't the only reason. My wife, Pam, who we had started dating when we were 16 years old in high school, got married after college. And after I lost the election, the next eight years, because I didn't have all this political stuff to do, I wasn't running all over the state, we did a lot of traveling together. We had a cottage on a little lake up by Reed City, and we spent a lot of time there. We had just become empty nesters. The year I lost the election. My son, my youngest, graduated from high school.

Which by the way, that same year that I lost the election, he was playing football for Lowell Red Arrows. They were playing against the Birmingham Brother Rice, which is a perennial favorite, Lowell just being a little rural school, wasn't favored. Jennifer Granholm's, I think it was their nephew played on that team. My son was playing on the team. And so the announcers say that it's the second gubernatorial

campaign. Luckily, the Red Arrows won that campaign. They beat the Birmingham Brother Rice and won the state championship. But that was the sidelight. But anyway, we spent time together-

Steve Mitchell:

Before you talk about Pam, you also, in the height of that race, lost your best friend.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah. Yeah. In the first September, middle of September, my best friend from high school, who we fished together, we hunted together, we just hung out together. And we all graduated from the same school. His wife and my wife, and I all graduated from the same class. I'd spent more time with him than almost anybody other than my family. He died. It was unfortunate. He had some mental health issues we were unaware of, and he committed suicide. And I'll never forget, I was in Detroit. I had just interviewed the Detroit Free Press, and I was on my way home, and a guy was driving, staff person was driving, and he got a phone call from home, and he said, "I'm going to stop to get something to eat." He pulled off and he said, "By the way, you should call home." And I called home, we were in Oakland County, and they said that Steve had died.

And the difficult thing was that there was no time to grieve. We went through the funeral, and in fact, the time with his family, and his wife was my wife's best friend. So we spent two or three days together. But in fact, the day of the funeral, that night, I had a fundraiser in Grand Rapids that I had to go to. So it was a difficult time. And anyway, we dealt with it, and I still miss him to this day.

Steve Mitchell:

It's amazing because people don't understand the pressure that politicians are under, that you can't even mourn your best friend because the campaign events are that important. But politicians are like anybody else, they have friends and they sometimes lose them. And it's difficult being in public life not being able to have that morning. But now let's talk about those years in which you were out of politics and with Pam. This is an important part of the story.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah. As I said, I think losing that race was one of the best things that happened to me. First, as I mentioned, on election night, then two years later I was in the hospital having cancer removed, they may never have found it earlier had I been elected governor.

Second thing happened, Pam and I, after becoming empty nesters, spent a lot of time together. We traveled together. We spent a lot of time at our cottage. And unfortunately, should I had run for governor and won reelection, which I think I would have. That's the other thing that happens, governors almost always win reelection in Michigan. And this would've been 2002. In 2009, which would've been the seventh year of my term, she was found to have cancer and in fact died in 2010. Had I been elected governor, I would've never been able to have those seven years. They were seven of the best years of our marriage, and I would've never had those with her.

So I said, I lost the election first because of cancer. I lost the election second because I got to spend this time with Pam. Well, there was a third reason, and that was on New Year's Eve or New Year's Eve day. I was sitting at home by myself, still kind of in grief for Pam. Normally I would go out. I wasn't going any place. I was just sitting there watching football games. And in fact, a friend of mine from Caledonia, which is where I went to high school, we were both members of the Caledonia American Legion called and said, "Hey, why don't you come down to the Legion and we'll have a beer and just get out of the house." And I said, "No, I'm going to stay here."

Steve Mitchell:

Was that Bill?

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah, Bill Neal. Is still a friend of mine today. I still see him every week. And I sat there a little longer and then about an hour later, another friend of mine by the name of Steve Mitchell called me and he said, "You should go out." I told him what I was doing and he asked what I was doing. And he said, "You should just get out of the house. Just go do something." And I said, "Well, maybe I will." And so Bill called again, I said, "Yeah, I'll come down and we'll get together."

So I went to the Legion in Caledonia, we had a couple beers, just we're talking and I thought, "Well, okay, now I'm going to go home." And he said, "Well, you got to eat. They're having a dinner and a dance out in the hall that night." And he said, "You got to eat. Why don't you come out and have just... It's kind of like a potluck. Come out and eat." So I said, "Okay." So I went out and was sitting at a table with about 8, 10 of my friends that I've grown up with in Caledonia. I ate and had a few more beers. And then obviously some of my friends' spouses saw that it wasn't a great mood, so they asked me to dance. So we got up and did some dancing.

Well, I didn't realize, but at the same time, there was a table right next to us where another group of friends and at one point during the night, and they were all married except for one. Our table all married except for one. At one point in the night, all these spouses got up, and there I was sitting there. At the other table, there was this woman sitting there and she said she had seen me dance and she was alone. So she came over and asked me to dance. Her name was Beth Ann. And we danced and we hit it off. We became friends.

In fact, the next day, because I was going to work for Rick Snyder, he was the elected governor, I came to the inaugural as one of the previous gubernatorial candidates. And I came here with Lisa, my daughter, because she was coming down as a newly elected representative. I rode down with her, I wasn't going to drive. And I got down there and I spoke as a previous office holder, I spoke to her caucus and I told her, it was about the middle of the afternoon. I said, "I want to go home." I was thinking of Beth Ann. I wanted to go back and see Beth Ann.

And she said, "Well, I'm not going home." Well, there was a Democrat state representative from Grand Rapids who said he was going home. So I hitchhiked a ride home with him. He had to go by my place in Alto, he dropped me off. I got out. I decided to go back to the Caledonia Legion because I knew she was going to be there the next day. So I went back there, I walked in and there she was next to this good-looking guy. And I thought, "Well, no." I was so disappointed. I went and sat down and about a half hour later she came over, and said, "Why ignore me? " I said, "Well, you're up there with this guy. I didn't want to..." "That's my cousin." Well, anyway, so six months later we were engaged. Nine months later, we were married. And so we've now been married 15 years this year as this is being taped.

Steve Mitchell:

So bless you.

Dick Posthumus:

So that's-

Steve Mitchell:

Not only one, but two wonderful wives.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah. And had I been elected governor, I would've never met Beth Ann and we would've never been married. So as a result of the loss of that, yes, I've been fortunate to have two wonderful spouses. But as a result of that election, I survived cancer, had eight, seven beautiful years with my wife and met my wife today. So I don't ever look back at losing that gubernatorial election as a sad day, but as a happy day.

Steve Mitchell:

So, you're in the wilderness for eight years running a company and doing other things. And all of a sudden Rick Snyder gets elected as a governor. You're out of politics, presumed you were going to be out of politics for the rest of your life. And then what happened? And how did you get in with the Rick Snyder campaign with the gubernatorial office?

Dick Posthumus:

Well, there were a number of people that had helped him in the campaign that knew me. And because almost all of the people in his campaign, he was really a non-political person, which I think was one of the reasons he got elected.

And almost all the people that helped him, they weren't the typical Republican operators. They were more from his internal staff. And if they were, they didn't understand the legislature. The people that were close to him that understood that suggested to him that he ought to talk to me because I was pretty good at understanding the legislature.

And if he was going to be a leader to get things done, he needed somebody that could get his policy passed through the House and the Senate. So, he asked me initially to come and help him out to be the director, to be a senior advisor for him on policy and to help direct his legislative affairs. And so I did that.

At first, I actually said, "No. I didn't want to get back into politics," but then I got phone calls from my good friend, John Engler, a college friend of mine that later became president of Michigan State University, Dave Porteous, and a fellow who had been state treasurer under John Engler, and at that time was president of Grand Valley State University, Mark Murray.

All three of them saying, "You got to do something. He needs you more than you need him. And if you want to make sure our policy is put back in place after eight years in the wilderness with Granholm, then you need to help him." And so I turned around and said, "Yes."

Steve Mitchell:

Politics is an interesting business just as you accidentally meet John Engler and then you meet Matt Engler, his dad, and then you're in the same dorm, you run his campaign. There's sometimes serendipity involved.

Tell me, one of the great business careers, one of the great political careers in terms of being a volunteer, became chair of the board at the Michigan State University is Dave Porteous.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah.

Steve Mitchell:

But serendipity enters into Dave Porteous's life. How?

Dick Posthumus:

Well, Dave and I met when we were both at Michigan State. I was after John won the primary when I was between my sophomore and junior year, I came back to college, but then I would drive up there for the general election.

Again, that wasn't as important in that district. It was a Republican district, but I'd drive up there, help him. And one which in his district was, it was this new... At that time was that... I'm trying to remember. That was his new Senate district.

I was driving up there to help him winning in that Senate district, and that included areas, I think of Reed City. And Dave Porteous was hitchhiking. He was a student of Michigan State. He was hitchhiking home. I picked up this kid. We got to talking and we became friends.

He ended up getting involved in the political world, ended up becoming president of Michigan State University, active in a number... He ran for the university board. And so yeah, it is-

Steve Mitchell:

The managing partner of Huntington Bank.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah.

Steve Mitchell:

Yeah. You wonder, had you not picked him up that time, perhaps his career doesn't go in that direction?

Dick Posthumus:

Who knows?

Steve Mitchell:

No, you don't know. He's a brilliant guy in a brilliant career, but a little bit of luck enters into your life.

Dick Posthumus:

Well, I guess there's enough Calvinists in my Dutch background that I believe God has a plan for all of us, and that was part of God's plan.

Steve Mitchell:

So now you're with your Governor Snyder. You've been in the wilderness, you're back in politics. Again, you're in a very important position. What were the major issues in this eight-year term that you were and of course it ultimately will become chief of staff?

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah. I think there were three issues that I think that the governor really made a major impact on Michigan on. Number one was on getting rid of the single business tax. For 25 years, probably almost three decades, political people have been saying, "We got to get rid of the single business tax because it was a discouragement for creating business in Michigan," and it never was done.

And he finally was able, with Republican majorities in the House and the Senate, and as a businessperson himself, he was able to convince the legislature why it was important to get rid of the single business tax.

And partly as a result of that, that wasn't the only reason. But in a large part, businesses began to come to Michigan. And after they had left Michigan during the Granholm era, they really began to grow again during this Snyder era. So that was very important.

Steve Mitchell:

How tough of a battle was that?

Dick Posthumus:

It was difficult. It was a tough issue, but not as difficult as the next two I'm going to mention. The second one was the elimination of right to work in Michigan. To give workers the right to join or not to join the union, not to be forced to join the union. And that had been tried for 40 years in Michigan and nobody was ever able to do a Republican or Democrat.

And Governor Snyder, again, was able to convince as a economic development person, a job provider, that this was important in Michigan. And despite horrible, I mean, it was tremendous negative pressure he was getting, especially from labor unions and ultra liberals and the Democratic Party.

It was very tough but we were able to pass it. And that may have been those two things together were the most significant thing that moved Michigan from about 40th in the country in job providing up to in the top 10. That was a significant change, huge change.

And unfortunately, when Gretchen Whitmer was elected and the Republicans lost control of both Houses, they were able to do away with that. But I think that change still had an impact by this time. And then the third thing that I think the governor really had a major impact was the passage.

At that time, Obamacare was passed nationally. There was this mandatory healthcare approach, but the governor took an approach in Michigan to expand Medicare to working poor. I mean, the problem was at the time, if you were very poor, you get Medicare. Once you went to work, you still were relatively poor, but you lost any healthcare because you probably didn't work for somebody that provided healthcare.

So, he was able to convince Republicans. Now, this is Republicans convinced as well as the Democrats on a form of Medicare in Michigan, which was different than that that had passed in Democrat states. And this form of Medicare still stands today and has been a tremendous help for low-income working people.

And those three things I think were the three most important policy changes. But if you ask me what will he be remembered for, I go back and say, what policies are governors remembered for? Almost none. G. Mennen Williams, what's he remembered for?

Steve Mitchell:

The Mackinac Bridge-

Dick Posthumus:

Mackinac Bridge.

Steve Mitchell:

... 1952.

Dick Posthumus:

And I told Governor Snyder, "I think what you will be remembered for is the building of the Gordie Howe Bridge," and that is a tremendous thing. Just as we're talking, it's preparing to open today, and I really believe that will have tremendous long-term economic and tourist impact from Michigan and Canada.

And that will be something because he did it. He was the one that negotiated that with the Canadians. I mean, he did that. And I think that will be what he's remembered for. By the way, I forgot one other critical policy change that he made. He probably knows everybody will forget it, but that was helping to create a statute and guide the city of Detroit through bankruptcy.

The city of Detroit was financially in deep, deep trouble, but he, as a businessman, understood that there are ways when businesses get in deep, deep trouble, sometimes you have to go through bankruptcy and then you rebuild from the ashes and you're able to thrive. And he felt that was what was needed in Detroit.

And in fact, it was very difficult to get Democrats and Republicans to agree to the passing of the statutes that would allow this bankruptcy to take place because it required changes in union contracts, in retirement contracts, all kinds of things.

And yet, I think, as a result of this, it really gave Detroit the opportunity and we've seen tremendous growth in Detroit since that time. And I think that that was an important piece of it.

Steve Mitchell:

Those were obviously very important parts of it. So, you're back in Lansing and back with a lot of old friends as you come back in. And then ultimately you become chief of staff for the last two and a half years?

Dick Posthumus:

Right. Yeah. Last two years, the chief of staff, Dennis Muchmore decided to go someplace else. And I actually was in Florida on a spring break with my family, and I got a call from Rich Baird, who was the governor's go-to guy.

Didn't have any official position, but he was the go-to guy for the governor, been a friend throughout his career, privately and politically. And he asked if I would consider being the chief of staff. And at first I said, "No." But then as we came back and talked to some folks of how we would work it out, I agreed to do that.

And so, I served the last two and a half years as his chief of staff, and that was a wonderful time too. I can't even remember what policies were passed before and after, but it was a time where as a result, the governor and I became very close friends.

And Governor Rick Snyder and I are very close friends to this day. He actually lives not too far from me in Gun Lake most of the year.

Steve Mitchell:

So, I mean, what a fascinating career. When you think about it, the only person with that high ranking job, lieutenant governor, senator majority leader to go into the administration as a staffer and do the job that you did, which was working on extraordinary, extraordinary battles.

That battle for Healthy Michigan, a couple of UP'ers are responsible for, first of all, Obamacare, the Affordable Care Act, and then for passing the Healthy Michigan package.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah. I don't remember-

Steve Mitchell:

Tom Casperson.

Dick Posthumus:

Yeah.

Steve Mitchell:

Who cast the deciding vote-

Dick Posthumus:

Deciding vote.

Steve Mitchell:

... and of course, the Affordable Care Act does not pass without Congressman Bart Stupak, who brings in eight right-to-lifers to support it right at the end. But I'm sure that you worked very hard to get those votes with Jim Haveman, who served in both the Engler administration and the Snyder administration with you.

Dick Posthumus:

Right. Yeah. And Jim's had a wonderful career himself in the area of healthcare and a wonderful person. I first met him when I was in the Senate. He was the director for mental health in Kent County.

And then he came, John Engler brought him down here as his, I think first as the director of mental health then they combined the departments of mental health and public health. Then he headed up that department, and then he did the same for Governor Snyder.

And I think Jim, as a Republican who believed in healthcare and helping people really, and also a guy with tremendous ethics, was able to convince Republicans that this isn't just about having government in healthcare or government not in healthcare. That in fact, they are in healthcare, Medicare, Medicaid, in various public, the public employees.

And his point was that we hit, and he pointed out it was a discouragement for people to go to work because if you were on Medicare or Medicaid, excuse me, and you went to work, you lost your healthcare. So, people, because usually if they went to work, they didn't go to work for an employee at that first rung of the ladder that provided healthcare.

And so, he said we needed to provide an incentive for people to go to work. And by providing this approach to providing Medicaid for low-income working people, it really helped get people off Medicaid.

Steve Mitchell:

But your role at that time, because of your understanding, you're there because you understand the legislature and you understand the process, had to be a tremendous part of it with that understanding, having been in that seat. And you take a look back at that battle and sometimes leaders lead. And one guy who started off as a, "Hell no," on that issue is Mike Shirkey.

Who ultimately would succeed as chairman of the... also as the Senate majority leader, in part because of leadership he took on that. And so just as you came up, others came up and you helped, I'm sure, facilitate that type of thing.

Before we get into asking a couple of final questions, your daughter becomes state representative in 2010. Unfortunately, you couldn't enjoy that, relish that victory because you were losing your wife at the same time. And now she's Kent County clerk.

And you've got another son who is Senate majority floor leader, excuse me, House majority floor leader, Bryan Posthumus. How does it feel to see two of your children follow in your footsteps and both having very successful careers?

Dick Posthumus:

Well, first of all, I'm proud of all four of my children. My oldest Krista was a teacher and she became a stay-at-home mom when she had her children and became a teacher at home. She homeschooled all three of her kids, which again is part of this choice that we created in Michigan. And so I'm very proud of her.

She's actually, right now as we speak, her youngest is a senior. She's going back to get her master's degree, looking at how she might affect public policy in some way. My second daughter, Lisa, as you mentioned, was elected to the House in 2010, served six years and then under term limits left.

And then fortunately, she ran a tough campaign and won as the county clerk and register of deeds in Kent County where she is at today. She actually ran for lieutenant governor with Bill Schuette when he ran for governor. Unfortunately, they lost, I think it was in, was it-

Steve Mitchell:

2018.

Dick Posthumus:

... 2018. But she still serves as a county clerk. She loves that. She has four kids. Two of them have graduated from high school, two are at home yet. And so she, I think, like me, puts her family first.

Steve Mitchell:

Also, if my memory serves me correctly, I know it does on this one, but she nominated you for lieutenant governor when you ran for lieutenant governor and you did the same for her.

Dick Posthumus:

Yes. Yeah, that's true. When I ran for lieutenant governor back in 2000 or 1998, she nominated me. And then when she ran for lieutenant governor in 2018, I nominated her, so it was a little circle here.

Steve Mitchell:

That does not happen to very many families that the daughter nominates the father to be lieutenant governor and the father then nominates the daughter to become lieutenant governor. I think there's no one in Michigan history that has done that except for the Posthumuses.

Dick Posthumus:

And then my third daughter, Heather, she was the only one of my kids not to go to Michigan State. We bleed in green and white. She bleeds green and white, but she ended up going to the University of Toledo and she ended up working, after college for an urban church in Toledo.

And when they, about maybe eight years later, opened a satellite church in Washington D.C., so she went out there to help grow that urban church there. And recently in the last few years, she left that job and now is working for the trade association that represents senior citizen housing throughout the country. So she's indirectly involved in public policy as well.

And then my son, Bryan, ran for state representative. I think it was '22, ran for state representative, won reelection in '24 and was elected the majority floor leader, and he represents Northern Kent County. So yes, I'm proud of all four of the kids.

I think they've all made mistakes like I have. They've all had their struggles like I have, but I think they all have a pretty good moral compass and that to me is as important as anything.

Steve Mitchell:

As you look back on this unheralded, I mean, there's this career that's unprecedented, being both an elected official for 20 years from 1982 to 2002 and then being in the highest echelons of the governor's office for another eight years. What are the accomplishments that you look back on the most in this feedback on your life?

Dick Posthumus:

I think the single most important accomplishment for me is that while I was able to accomplish these things in public office, that I always held my faith and my family above it all.

And the family, the accomplishment of having two wonderful spouses, four wonderful kids, now three wonderful step kids, seven grandkids, that to me is the most important accomplishment in my life.

Steve Mitchell:

Well, it has been a full life that you continue to have, and you still look like a young guy at the age of less, a little more than 32 now. And it has been a great opportunity. I'm glad I had the opportunity to interview you for the Michigan Political Historical Society.

And I think if people watch it, they'll not only know the public figure, but they'll know the private individual and the cost sometimes that politics has on all of us. So, on behalf of them, thank you for asking me to interview you and thank you very much for the service that you've provided Michigan and the accomplishments that you've been a major part of.

Dick Posthumus:

Thank you, Steve. Thanks.