DEBBIE STABENOW

Interviewed by
Chuck Stokes

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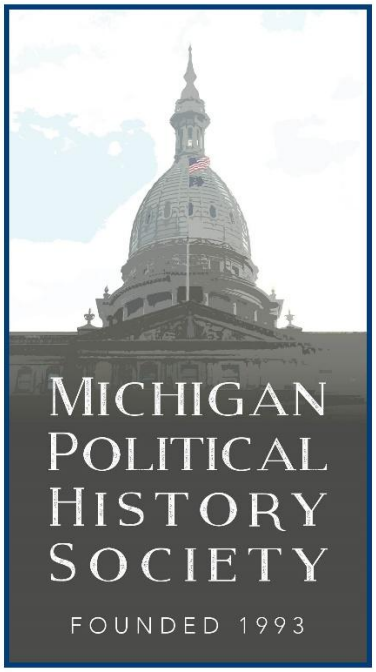

Chuck Stokes:

Senator Stabenow, thank you for sitting down with us here in the old Supreme Court chambers, which is now the Senate Appropriations Room.

Senator Stabenow:

That's right. My old stomping grounds.

Chuck Stokes:

Old stopping ground. We're surrounded by the beauty of Michigan here, and all its craftsmanship. 50 years of public service is a long, long time. We're going to reflect on that, but there were the years before you ever got into public service. A lot of times people forget that you're a little person before you become the big person. Let's go back.

You were born in 1950 in April in Gladwin, Michigan.

Senator Stabenow:

Right.

Chuck Stokes:

But you were raised in Claire.

Senator Stabenow:

Right.

Chuck Stokes:

So how much time was in Gladwin, and what was your age when you went to Claire?

Senator Stabenow:

Well, I was only two years old when I moved to Claire.

Chuck Stokes:

Oh, you were a little baby.

Senator Stabenow:

Little baby. My grandpa and my dad had a car dealership, the Oldsmobile dealership. We don't have Oldsmobiles anymore.

Chuck Stokes:

Not anymore.

Senator Stabenow:

But they were right on Main Street, and we were one of the main businesses in town. My mom was a nurse and she, over the years, had many positions ending with being Director Of Nursing at the Claire Hospital. I had such appreciation for the importance of the hospital. I think part of the reason I've been

interested in healthcare my whole life came from growing up around the hospital with my mom, watching how much she cared about people, how much she made a difference. My first real job, I guess, was I cleaned test tubes in the basement of the hospital. That really dates me because now they just throw them away. I grew up in a setting where ... Grew up in the church, very active.

Chuck Stokes:

United Methodist.

Senator Stabenow:

Yep. United Methodist Church. Always involved in the church. My dad directed the youth choirs over the years. He also played saxophone. He was really an excellent saxophonist. We grew up in music. I grew up in a world where people knew each other and cared about each other. It was interesting, years later, as an elected official, people would say, "Well, how do you feel about everybody knowing who you are? Was that hard to get used to? " I thought about it and I thought, no, growing up in Claire, everybody always knew who I was.

Chuck Stokes:

It was a small little community.

Senator Stabenow:

It was a small town.

Chuck Stokes:

Yeah. Everybody knew each other.

Senator Stabenow:

I was Bob Greer's daughter. I grew up with everybody knowing who you were, which meant you had to be careful because somebody would tell your mom and dad if you screwed up. There was a sense of community that I really appreciated.

Chuck Stokes:

Yeah. Do you have any really favorite memories of Claire that just stuck with you as childhood memories that, as you look back on your life said, that had a major impact even if I didn't realize it at the time?

Senator Stabenow:

Chuck, there were so many actually growing up. A lot of those in the church over the years played leadership role in various ways in United Methodist Youth Group. I chaired a committee called Social Concerns and didn't realize at the time how much that was going to pique my interest about the world around me, about what was happening to people in our country, as well as internationally. I did a lot of work in the local youth group, so much so that the state United Methodist Board reached out to me and asked me to be part of a statewide effort on social concerns. At that point, I didn't connect it to politics, I connected it to the call of Matthew 25 to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and care about your neighbor and so on, which is what I grew up with.

I also was involved in 4-H.

Chuck Stokes:

Oh, okay.

Senator Stabenow:

Yeah. We lived in town, so I couldn't have big animals, but I had rabbits at one point, but I was involved in all the traditional zoning, cooking, photography, and got involved in sort of public speaking, which again, I didn't realize actually would sort of make me more comfortable speaking in front of the public.

Then I was involved in drama and school plays. We were a small, primarily white Christian community, and so I played Anne Frank in the school play.

Chuck Stokes:

Wow. Okay.

Senator Stabenow:

Didn't exactly look Jewish, but it was a wonderful opportunity for me to feel what she must have felt and what was happening, and again, to put myself on a stage in front of people. I didn't realize that between that, and music, and performing and so on, that it would put me in a spot years later to really feel comfortable speaking in front of people.

Chuck Stokes:

Do you recall, Senator, when, or how, you made the decision to go to Michigan State University?

Senator Stabenow:

Well, I was somebody looking actually both at Michigan and Michigan State at the time, and accepted to both. I was valedictorian in my little school. I think we had 97 people in our class, something like that.

Chuck Stokes:

It was a small high school.

Senator Stabenow:

Small, small. I went to both campuses and I think I loved the Michigan State campus. I think growing up in a rural community, it just felt more like a place that I would be comfortable in. The beauty of it, the horticultural gardens, the beauty around us, I really fell in love with. I don't know if I had a scholarship to U of M, I can't remember, but because my dad had been sick ... I was high grades, low income and so I got a full tuition fee scholarship to Michigan State, four years, tuition fee scholarship.

Chuck Stokes:

Congratulations.

Senator Stabenow:

Also, was a resident assistant actually for two years to help pay my room and board. My folks couldn't afford to really pay for me to go, so I had to work my way through. I was blessed, when I think about what would've happened to me if I hadn't had that full tuition fee scholarship from Michigan State, which not enough kids have today.

Chuck Stokes:

Yeah. You decided you wanted to major in social work?

Senator Stabenow:

Yes.

Chuck Stokes:

Yeah. Why?

Senator Stabenow:

Well, again, I was interested in several things. Actually my master's degree is in social work. My undergraduate, I was in the honors college and I was in a new program where you could pick three areas of interest to come together. It was called Multidisciplinary Social Science. I was interested in criminal justice, psychology and sociology. In fact, one of my most wonderful memories as an undergrad is my professor, Bob [inaudible 00:08:24], who really was the father of community policing. He wrote the first book about the effectiveness of law enforcement being in the community, of the community, knowing people, and having relationships and so on. I just love that class.

I got my undergrad and then went to school in the Lansing Public Schools for a year, in a position that was quasi-social work. I was working with the police department, with kids that were getting into trouble. At that time, kids that were maybe on drugs and needed help, but sort of the liaison.

Chuck Stokes:

Sure.

Senator Stabenow:

That caused me to want to look at school social work, and so went back to get my master's degree in social work. Then got spirited away, not on purpose, to politics when I went to this meeting of women in the community that heard a presentation about how Ingham County was trying to close the Ingham County Medical Care Facility, which is the only one in the community that cared for low income seniors. I couldn't believe they were doing that, so I got involved.

Chuck Stokes:

You were still a student.

Senator Stabenow:

I was.

Chuck Stokes:

You found this cause that got up under your skin, you had medical history a little bit in your background because of your mom. As you reflect back, was it difficult to make that decision to get involved, or was it just very natural thing for you to do? As a woman, was it a tough decision to make given the times?

Senator Stabenow:

Well, first, in terms of just getting involved in the issue and the community, it was really seamless. I mean, I couldn't believe that the county would consider closing the only nursing home that took Medicaid funding for people in our community. I got engaged, one thing led to another, I ended up leading the effort to keep the nursing home open, going to county commission meetings over and over again, which began to open my eyes like, "Who are these people? How are they making decisions that are affecting our lives?"

At the same time, my former husband had run for county commission. I was seeing, politically, what he was doing. He nearly lost his race, but that also got me thinking, these people doing these things and they are making decisions that are impacting people and not understanding how they're doing that.

One thing led to another, we stopped them from closing the nursing home and then everybody turned around to me and said, "Well, you live in the district of the guy trying to close the nursing home, leading the fight." I went, "Oh." They said, "You need to beat him." My first reaction was, "No, I don't know anything about politics. Really seriously other people are interested, but I don't know anything." Then one thing led to another and I was really mad and so I decided to run.

Now, first thing I would say is, at that time, women were not putting themselves forward to run unless somebody asked them, so that was point one. Now, I hadn't really thought about running, but even if I had, back in the '70s, that was not something that women did without being criticized as too ambitious. I decided to run. I ran against him. I knocked on every door in the district, over and over again, and he referred to me as that young broad running against me. I was 24 years old.

Chuck Stokes:

That got up under your skin.

Senator Stabenow:

In the end, the young broad beat him. Then I went into the county commission and, I think, there were only two of us at the time, two women out of 21, Joanne [inaudible 00:12:37] and I, my dear friend. I started looking around at all the things. The county is so important. Everything from law enforcement, and criminal justice, to the parks, to public health, and mental health, and the roads, and the drains. I mean, that's where you get things done. I began to see also that there were a lot of things not being focused on that affected women and children.

I was on a committee. One day I asked the sheriff's department and the prosecutor who were in what their statistics were on domestic violence. They said, "Well, we don't keep numbers on domestic violence." I said, "Well, why not? " I was able to get that change where we were able then to find out how many assaults there were, how much domestic violence was going on. It turned out this was the most dangerous situation a police officer would walk into, violence in a home, walking in and they were more likely to be hurt than in other situations. In fact, jumping forward, when I went into the State House, the first bill that I authored was on warrantless arrests, allowing police officers to arrest in that situation, if they did not actually see the violence occurring, but they saw the blood, they saw it was clear, there was probable cause to believe there had been violence, that the police officer could then arrest and remove people from that situation. That was not the case until 1979, 1980.

I was in so many places within the county, and throughout my life, but particularly watching there, what about childcare, what about other situations that I just thought were part of quality of life for everybody, but they were a particular concern to women. I realized that if we weren't in the room, if I wasn't in the room asking the question, then nobody was going to focus on it.

Chuck Stokes:

Then after your time on the county commission, you said, "How about this building," the state capitol. Reflect back on your decision to run for the House of Representatives.

Senator Stabenow:

For me, it was never about the title. It was about being in the best place to actually get things done. I was on the county board for four years, I actually chaired the board after two years. For two years I chaired the board. I had put together a task force of the community, and law enforcement, and the prosecutor's office to focus on domestic violence. We had created the first domestic violence shelter in our county, still here today. In fact, it was one of the first two in Michigan. Ann Arbor was doing something the same time we were advancing, so these were the first two domestic violence shelters.

As I was moving through that, I was on the community mental health board, I was judging Lansing and building a new jail. I realized that the things I really wanted to do weren't at the county anymore, they were at the state. That's what caused me to say, "Okay. Maybe it would be better if I was in the State House."

Chuck Stokes:

You beat a man named Tom Holcomb. Was it a tough victory? Tough fight?

Senator Stabenow:

Again, it sounds funny to say I wasn't political, because of course I was because I was an elected official, but I was not a seasoned political person.

Chuck Stokes:

Politician.

Senator Stabenow:

We had three state representatives from Ingham County. I felt the person was not doing the job I would hope he would be doing, was our state rep. There was Dave Hollister, Lynn Jondahl and Tom Holcomb. Again, a lot of people encouraging me saying, in a primary, that I could beat him. Now, I didn't know at that time that you didn't run in primary. Democrats didn't challenge Democrats. I also learned something else. I mean, at that time, again, I'll never forget a couple of conversations that I was really shocked about from senior women calling me and saying, "Wait your turn. This is not your time. Wait your turn." Which was not uncommon for women to hear. Don't challenge a man, particularly if it's a Democrat, but I went ahead. I knew I could beat him, and I did beat him.

We went on, later in life, to be friends, but I learned something at that time because he was an incumbent and he was backed by labor. I didn't fully understand, at that point, what that meant in terms of taking on the labor community. Then I won. They were looking around again and going, "Who is this person?" They very quickly saw that I was a supporter, and we were able to mend fences very quickly.

Chuck Stokes:

During your years, I guess it started on the commission, but also through the legislature, you had young children.

Senator Stabenow:

Well, I actually had my children. I was the first woman to be in elected office and be pregnant, and have babies, in Michigan. It was just something that was just beginning to happen across the country, I'm not sure there was more than a handful of us. I was fortunate because I represented Lansing, so I was 10 minutes from the Capitol. I was a 20 minute drive from Mason for the county. The county commission was a part-time position, so I chose to have my son. We had my son, Todd. I used to take him to meetings with me. I'll never forget one time when he was sitting in his car seat next to me and we were sitting around a table and a colleague was going just on and on, everybody was rolling their eyes and Todd threw up and everybody started laughing. They said, "That's how we felt." They always remember Todd.

Then moving forward to my daughter, Michelle, I so wanted two children, a boy and a girl. I was blessed to have that happen. Again, I had her as a state representative and I felt I could do that because I was 10 minutes from home. I was 10 minutes from the school, 10 minutes from home. Having a very, very supportive husband who chose to work part-time. I was working part-time when Todd was born. He went down to part-time when Michelle was, so we were really working hard to do everything.

I will remember when Michelle, when I was pregnant at that time, State Representative Barbara Rose Collins wanted to do a shower for me and did, in the Capitol, one of the committee rooms. My colleagues, of course, overwhelmingly male, I don't think they'd ever been to a shower before, so I ended up with like 80 different stuffed animals.

Chuck Stokes:

They figured that's got to be the typical thing.

Senator Stabenow:

We were like taking them out in cars and so on, but I appreciated the gesture. I did very much appreciate the gesture.

I will say it was a different time. I was judged differently. It was hard there. Today, it's so much better. Both men and women taking maternity and paternity leave, and just the welcoming nature, and the flexibility that's occurring is so important because when I started, I was judged by could I meet the schedule that every man had? If not, then we told you she couldn't do the job. There were all of those things. Now, I will say, on the good side as a state rep, when I was pregnant, I got a lot of legislation passed actually. We would laugh about that later. One colleague said, "Well, when you get up to talk, I forget that you're pregnant." I said, "Well, pregnancy doesn't affect the brain."

Chuck Stokes:

Right.

Senator Stabenow:

I realized that they were worried about upsetting me. So I just kept going.

Chuck Stokes:

You kept pouring right through and getting your legislation done.

After a term in the Senate, and you weren't there that long, you decided, "Let's make a run for governor." Talk about that experience and what you learned from that experience. You've had win, after win, after win, after win, and that was your only defeat.

Senator Stabenow:

Right. Right.

Chuck Stokes:

You were running against Howard Wolpe in the primary.

Senator Stabenow:

Right. Right. There were actually several people in that primary, but Howard was the person who won the primary. Nobody wants to lose. I was a state senator who, at that time, had been very active in taking on the current governor, John Engler. I really felt that I could do something important, do a lot of good as governor and decide to run. It was the first time that just putting my head down and working hard wasn't enough. Every place I'd been before, that was a challenge, I had found if you just work harder, if you just work harder and focus and so on, then you could win. When you're statewide, there's so much money that has to be raised, there's a whole different calibration of help, and consultants, and folks that you need, that it's a whole different kind of situation. I felt like we were building the plane as we were flying, trying to really do that.

Now, on the positive side of things, this is when EMILYs List was just really getting going, 1994. In fact, I authored the founder of EMILYs List, Ellen Malcolm, in my house in Lansing for her first visit to Lansing to talk about this whole idea of Democratic women who wanted to support women running for national office, and statewide office, could come together and they would let them know who had to be pro-choice and who was viable to actually win an election. You could become a part of EMILYs list if you gave $100 a year, and then committed to write two different $100 checks to the person of your choice, the woman of your choice, who was on their list. At that time, $100 was a big contribution.

EMILYs List got very involved in supporting me running for governor. They really were a godsend for me. I mean, it was a very close race, came in a very close second, and I don't think that would've even been possible if it hadn't been for EMILYs List stepping up and all of the women in Michigan and across the country supporting me. I was the first woman to run for governor, as a serious contender. I will say, I remember at that time, I had great support from the building trades and certain parts of labor, but the head of the AFL-CIO said at the time he would never support a candidate in a skirt, so I put on a pantsuit. It was hard. I realized there were a whole set of variables that I had not planned on, when I got into it.

Chuck Stokes:

Senator, as you reflect back, these many years later, on your time in the Michigan legislature, you passed a lot of legislation, but were there some key pieces that just stick with you that they were priority for you? As you reflect back and say, "I'm so glad that I did that." I know you don't want to talk about all of them, but which ones stand out the most?

Senator Stabenow:

Well, thank you. There are actually 50 state acts with my name on it, so I'm not going to talk about all of them. I won't bore you with all of them. When I came into the State House, from the county commission, I was very focused on issues around violence. I mentioned domestic violence and the work I did, but focusing on children. I authored what's called the Children's Trust Fund, which was an effort to focus on preventing child abuse, not picking up the pieces, but preventing it. Setting up a trust fund that created a checkoff on our income tax. We have that still today to emphasize how we could also raise private money for it. I reached out to Magic Johnson, who I knew a little bit, and Dr. Charles Tucker, who

I had worked with, who worked with Magic, and asked him to be involved in a fundraiser that I created called The Magic Ride.

We actually, over the years, raised about $2 million for the Children's Trust Fund with a lot of help from volunteers and people across the state. I wanted to make the point that we could raise money into this fund. It was important to work with young parents leaving the hospital that had no support at home on parenting skills. We don't focus on the front end enough, and in my judgment, we still don't focus on the front end, but the Children's Trust Fund was an important effort to do that.

The second thing I did was work with parents who had severely multiply impaired children at home and were trying to keep them at home rather than going into an institution of some kind. I'll never forget a woman who came to visit me in my office and she said, "I have a son, multiply impaired, and if I put him in foster care or an institution, the state will pay for all of it, but if I want to keep him at home, I have no help at all." I thought, wow. The home family should be the first step, not institutionalization.

I asked her to meet with other parents. We met, we spent actually more than a year talking about what would help them keep their children at home. What I realized is it was different things. For somebody it might be a wheelchair, it might be reconfiguring a house, it might be respite care, it might be time out for mom and dad so they can take care of the child the rest of the year. I ended up creating something called the Family Support Subsidy Act. It was the first of its kind in the country to give a direct financial help to parents that mirrored what is done for social security disability. If your child was under the age of 18, you would get help to be able to care for them at home.

One of the most meaningful things to me was being in an airport a few years ago and having a woman come up to me and say, because of that work, she was able to have her child with her until the age of 30, that he had passed away, but that he had lived a good life at home. She showed me a picture. It meant so much to me to know that. That was incredibly, incredibly meaningful.

There's so many, I will just mention two more. Court reform. For the first time, we put into place a law where you could garner wages instead of putting, usually, dad, in jail. Dads were born to jail, and instead we changed the system and also created visitation rights and so on.

Then the final one, which was a big fight, there were so many issues, but I was really pleased to author the Child Restraint, the car seat law. At the time in the '80s, number one cause of death were car accidents for children.

Chuck Stokes:

And now everybody does it.

Senator Stabenow:

Everybody.

Chuck Stokes:

You don't even think about it, just like putting on your seatbelt.

Senator Stabenow:

Exactly. You don't even think about that.

Chuck Stokes:

You feel guilty if you don't do it, plus you can get into trouble with the law.

Senator Stabenow:

You can get into trouble. There were safety groups, law enforcement groups, all kinds of advocacy groups that had been clamming for something to be done. We all knew that you put a child in a car seat, that you dramatically lessen the idea that they would be hurt or certainly killed. I took that on because it was so important. It was going to affect every family with a child. It was going to affect the future for kids and their parents.

I was lucky because State Senator Bill Sederburg, who was my state senator, joined me in it. He put the bill in, in the Senate, I put it in the House. We both had daughters that were toddlers and they became the poster child, when we did the press conference, for the Child Restraint Law.

You could imagine, I mean, we were requiring that people put their children in car seats, and so we had to work with groups to figure out how to help people afford this, and make sure that we were not burdening families unduly. We saw very quickly, once we put that in place, the numbers of child deaths went down, dramatically. It was hard, it was a fight.

I feel like so many of the things I worked on were very significant. I didn't want to work on small things, I wanted to work on big things. It would make a difference. This was a big one and it's saved lives, and so I'm very grateful.

Chuck Stokes:

Yeah. In many respects, what you majored in, especially on the graduate level, years earlier at MSU, social work, became the fabric of the type of legislation that you champion. Wouldn't it be safe ...

Senator Stabenow:

It did. Yeah. It's always been about people for me. I have to say, we wrote down our sort of mission statement back when I was in State House, State Senate, US House, US Senate. We reviewed it a while ago, and it really hasn't changed. It was all about making government work for people, making people's lives better, whether it's great constituent service. I'm very proud of the fact, as a US Senator, we helped over three and a half million people, whether it was with their veterans check, their social security check, getting their passport, I mean, whatever it was.

It is about helping people. That's what this is supposed to be about. There are things that we can do by ourselves, and there are things we need to do together. You can't protect our Great Lakes by yourself. You can't build a road by yourself. We can't protect communities, and law enforcement by ourselves. We really don't want a group of vigilantes just going out and shooting it up, we want a system that protects people, and a healthcare system. We want our food to be safe. You can go on and on and on, and it involves coming together in this thing we call government. It always has. The question is, how do you make it work? How do you make sure it's not too intrusive, but does what we want? Who are the people that are going to decide that? How can we create some kind of balance where this works for everybody and not just a few people?

Chuck Stokes:

You made history in this state when you became Michigan's first female senator. You beat Spencer Abraham. He had served one term, you ended up beating him. What did it mean to you, personally, to have that type of accomplishment and to break that glass ceiling?

Senator Stabenow:

Well, that was a big deal for me, and I know also from a state standpoint.

It's interesting though, again, I never was looking at a title. I didn't run against Spence because I wanted the title of being a United States Senator. I didn't even run against him because a woman hadn't beat a United States Senator in our whole country before. I mean, it wasn't that that was the challenge. I knew I could do more if I had a six-year term. When I was in the House, I had four years in the House of Representatives, which I appreciated, but you're running every two years. I was in a very competitive district, and you were constantly on the one hand raising money and campaigning, on the other hand, trying to get things done. I felt I couldn't spend as much time as I wanted to on actually solving problems and getting things done. It was just constantly, constantly running for reelection.

I was looking at this new US Senator who had a very different view from me. He didn't come home. He wasn't in festivals, and parades, and we hadn't heard good things about constituent services. I'm looking at this and going, "I think I could beat him, and that would give me a six-year turn." At one point it was, "Okay. I'm going to run. If I don't beat him, I will go on and do something else. There are many other opportunities for me to serve and make a difference." I didn't want to just continually be in a situation where I was running for the office and not having a chance to be in the office and do a good job. So I decided that I would run.

I think a lot of people thought I wouldn't be successful. That was a case where I didn't have a primary because I think everybody thought too hard to be an incumbent and it was not easy to do, but I worked very hard. I learned a lot of lessons from before, running statewide. We had a fabulous team. We were able to raise the resources that were necessary to do it. I didn't have a big win. I mean, we didn't find out till the next day. It was close. It was close.

Chuck Stokes:

It was a squeaker.

Senator Stabenow:

It was a squeaker. It was a moment for me where I knew if I was going to really do the things I wanted to do and make a difference, I wanted that six-year term.

Chuck Stokes:

Senator, to get key legislation through, you have to work in a bipartisan type of way.

Senator Stabenow:

Exactly.

Chuck Stokes:

Talk about some of the relationships that you had with some of the key people across the political aisle that allowed you to be able to get the Farm Bill or legislation on the Great Lakes and protecting our Great Lakes. Things that stand out in your mind, doesn't necessarily have to be those two, but maybe some behind the scenes stories so that people understand what it takes to get things done in Lansing, Washington, wherever the halls are.

Senator Stabenow:

You have to work across the aisle if you're going to get things done in a democracy. Our goal needs to be to hold onto that democracy. Whether it was working with Senator Bill Sederburg on the Child's Safety Seat Law, or so many other things I did in the state legislature, or if it was the Great Lakes, which went

throughout my career. When I was in the state Senate, I authored provisions that brought Michigan into the Great Lakes Water Diversion Program to protect our waters, to make sure that other states couldn't get their hand on our waters. I did so many things. When I went to US House, I worked on this.

When I went into the Senate, the first bill that I authored was a bill to stop any drilling in our Great Lakes. The governor at the time, Governor Engler, had wanted to do that. I was successful because I had bipartisan support. I traditionally, on the Great Lakes, had a partner from Ohio at the time, Senator DeWine. Rob Portman did a lot of wonderful work with me. We chaired the Great Lakes Task Force together and JD Vance was the last person I worked with on legislation for the Great Lakes. This was a theme for me, from the state legislature, to the United States Senate.

Part of that is because we have a special responsibility. We have 95% of the country's freshwater around us, and we should be the ones that are constantly working, whether it's stopping the invasive carp from coming into the Great Lakes, making sure commerce works, like having the Soo Locks up, which I championed to make sure we have a new lock so that our barges can come in and out of the Great Lakes, or whether it's other water quality issues. The Great Lakes was one.

You mentioned the Farm Bill. It's done every five years. I worked with Senator Pat Roberts. When I did the first Farm Bill, it took actually two different terms. The House of Representatives was controlled by Republicans at the time, they wanted to cut food assistance, do other things that we didn't support, so it took us longer. We had to try it twice, write it twice. Senator Thad Cochran was the second Republican that I worked with. It was interesting, because I didn't know him. He was from Mississippi, had very different crops that they grew. I had a lot to learn about what he was interested in. They grow cotton and they care about catfish, neither of which we have in Michigan, so I had a lot to learn.

Someone said to me that he loved the piano and I play the piano. And so the first time I went in his office, he had a baby grand piano in his office.

Chuck Stokes:

In his office.

Senator Stabenow:

I said, "Thad, oh my gosh." I sat down and started playing the Boogie Woogie, which is kind of the family anthem at my house that everybody plays. He said, "Oh my gosh, I love the Boogie Woogie." Of course, he's Mississippi, he loves blues. We both sat down and started playing and immediately hit it off. His staff, I think they were outside the room listening, thinking, "What are they doing?" We were playing the piano and really became friends, even though we had very different states and very different interests. When things got tough when we were negotiating, I would say to Thad, "I think we should go back to the piano and have a little negotiation."

Chuck Stokes:

Little Boogie Woogie time.

Senator Stabenow:

Boogie Woogie. Music has been in my life in so many different ways, but I never thought it was going to be part of my getting a farm bill done.

Chuck Stokes:

Senator, the farm bill was actually signed at Michigan State University by President Obama at the time. That has to have special meaning to you.

Senator Stabenow:

Oh my goodness. Well, first let me say it was wonderful to have President Obama accept my invitation. We'd never had a five-year farm bill signed outside of Washington. I said to him, "You need to come to our first land grant university in this country, Michigan State University, and sign it there." It was a great day. It was really a great day.

Chuck Stokes:

Did you have to twist his arm a little bit?

Senator Stabenow:

It was not too bad.

Chuck Stokes:

A little bit.

Senator Stabenow:

I pulled him aside after a State of the Union and said, "Mr. President, this is really important to me. Would you be willing to come?" He smiled and he said, "Well, let me take a look and see if we can do it. " It takes a lot of work to move a president, by the way, so this is no small thing. I appreciated, not only him, but all of his staff being willing to do that. To get to that point, this was 2014 it took a lot of work. It took a lot of work. This was the first farm bill that I had done. I'd always been on the agriculture committee, whether I was in the state legislature, or the US House, or US Senate. First of all, growing up in a rural community, secondly, we need to grow things. I've always said you don't have an economy unless somebody makes something and somebody grows something. I've always felt it was important to represent our farmers and rural communities.

I took over chairing the committee and we went through a lot of changes trying to update farm policy. Fruits and vegetables hadn't been included before, I was able to get them included so that all of agriculture was included in the farm bill. It's difficult because the farm bill is less about partisanship, at least it has been, and more about regions, what you grow, and figuring out how you can bring everybody together.

Chuck Stokes:

Washington really is about relationships, as well as Lansing.

Senator Stabenow:

It is.

Chuck Stokes:

As you think back, did you have a favorite governor, and did you have a favorite president?

Senator Stabenow:

Oh my gosh. You can't ask me about favorite governor. I mean, I love all our Democratic governors.

Chuck Stokes:

Not that you dislike the others. Anyone you had a particularly close relationship with?

Senator Stabenow:

I mean, with Jim Blanchard, I chaired the Small Business Committee, we did a lot of work together. Jennifer Granholm, Gretchen Whitmer. I mean, I think each of them did really a great job.

Chuck Stokes:

You worked with them all.

Senator Stabenow:

As president, I came into the US House when Bill Clinton was starting his second term. I always used to laugh because within six months of his starting his second term, we had passed a balanced budget for the first time in 30 years. I said, "It only took me six months to pass a balanced budget." That was a different time, but I mean, I enjoyed very much working with him.

I would say President Obama, we went through the auto rescue together. He had so much on his plate. He came into a financial crisis. I mean, our Democratic presidents, over and over again, have come into messes that have had to be cleaned up. He had a big one with the financial crisis and then the auto rescue. I was so grateful for his position and his team, as well as the vice president, Joe Biden, standing with us on the auto rescue.

I had a major role in a number of pieces, not only working with the delegation on the auto loans, but afterwards I authored this little bill called Cash for Clunkers, which ended up getting all kinds of attention, but ended up bringing people back into the car dealerships with incentives right when they were coming out of the loans and bankruptcy, which helped spur what happened in terms of the economy and a clean energy loan program that helped them retool. President Obama was, in so many ways, I had worked with him on manufacturing clean energy and so on.

President Trump signed my second farm bill in 2018, which I appreciated. President Biden and I worked on so many things together, including the largest investment in community mental health, which was part of the gun safety legislation that didn't get the attention that we wish it had. That was a major tenure effort working with a Republican colleague, Roy Blunt from Missouri, who is still, to this day, a great friend of mine. We really came together, we had worked on community health centers, and led the effort to fund those and renew the funding. I said to Roy, "How come we have these great ways of funding community health clinics, but nothing for mental health and addiction? Behavioral health in the community is funded mainly through grants that stop and start. That makes no sense." I used to have this mantra, I still today, of healthcare above the neck should be funded the same as healthcare below the neck. Roy said to me, "You're right. Let's do that. Why don't you put together what would make sense and let's do that." We put together legislation to create certified community behavioral health clinics.

On the 50th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy signing the last bill he ever signed before his death, was the Community Mental Health Act. We went to the floor of the Senate, on the 50th anniversary, to introduce the Excellence in Mental Health and Addiction Treatment Act, which would fully put in place what his vision had been. He said, "We shouldn't be housing people, at that time, in asylums or in hospitals. We should be providing quality care close to home." Over the years,

unfortunately, part of it happened. We closed the hospitals, we did not create the community services that have been needed. Roy and I were for 10 years, we started a pilot project. It was 10 years of working, working, working. It was truly bipartisan.

At the point at which they were negotiating the gun legislation, everybody kept saying, "We should do something about mental health." We had 10 years' worth of data that we were, in the states where we were doing this, keeping people out of jail, out of the emergency room, and they were getting treatment. We looked at each other and said, "This is the moment." It was President Biden and it was a bipartisan coalition that negotiated some gun safety reforms. We went to them and said, "Okay, you want something on mental health? We got it. It's evidence-based, it's proven. All we need is funding." It was fully funded. So now we have over 500 clinics across the country, 42 in Michigan and counting. We still need more. We need these kinds of clinics in every community so people aren't going to jail when what they really need is just to get some help.

Chuck Stokes:

Yeah. They oftentimes say hindsight is 20/20. When you think back, was there something in your career that if you could do it over again, you might vote a different way or you might take a different position?

Senator Stabenow:

In terms of voting, I don't think so. I mean, I don't think of anything. I had very tough votes. I had a lot of tough votes, particularly in the United States Senate. I mean, going through so many different things during my tenure there, from 9/11 to January 6th, and the assaults at the Capitol and so on. I think the toughest vote for me, and I don't regret it at all, but the toughest vote was going to war in Iraq because I ultimately voted no, there were 23 of us. This is after 9/11 happened. I supported going into Afghanistan, but then President George W. Bush took, what I felt was, a leap to then focus on Iraq, but I was open to it. I was one of the people that was open to the very end.

I sat in Secretary Rumsfeld's cabinet room listening to the presentations. I saw videos. I talked to Colin Powell. I was trying to sort through, because this is going to war. This is putting our men and women in harm's way. I listened to all of it, and when I got to the end of it, I had a son and daughter in their 20s, and I looked at all the evidence and said, "Would I send my son or daughter to war based on what I know?" The answer was no, and so how could I send somebody else's? That was a scary vote because for those of us who voted no, something else could have happened and we could have been blamed somehow for not supporting this. Turned out that I believe we were right, and it became clear that we were right. That was a very weighty decision, frankly. Going to war, sending men and women to war should be the most serious of decisions that we make.

Chuck Stokes:

With all of your years of experience, as you look at America and our government today, are you hopeful about America's future or are you very concerned about America's future and democracy?

Senator Stabenow:

Well, we're sitting here in 2025 and next year is the 250th anniversary of our country. We are a country based on ideas, the American dream, the hope and belief that everyone, if you work hard, has a fair shot to make it. That's what most of us want to see happen. We're based on a set of freedom that we have, I think, taken for granted for too long; freedom of speech, or religion, or to assemble, the freedoms that have set America apart from other dictatorships.

Right now, in 2025, I think we're at a crossroads, whether we're going to be able to keep those freedoms. I hope everyone who watches this video years and years from now will say, "We did it. We made it through it," that people came together and rejected the idea of a dictatorship and that we realize that we need to keep our democracy and our freedoms. We have a great country with a great democracy, but we're going to have to work really, really hard and engage in ways that may make us feel uncomfortable right now, because the limits are being pushed on every angle.

I believe we can do it, but I think it's going to take a lot of hard work. I also believe that we are a country that should believe, and what we do should be based on the idea that we all do better. Wouldn't we all do better? That's the strength of our country.

Chuck Stokes:

You made the decision to retire from the US Senate. You're still involved. What does retirement mean for Debbie Stabenow?

Senator Stabenow:

Well, I've been so blessed, Chuck, first of all, with an incredible family that has always supported me, even when it was tough and complicated, and we were at the whim of the Senate schedule to decide when to get together for Christmas dinner. I've been blessed with staff that are, I believe, the smartest and the best, who have shared my vision for wanting to help people and get things done. We've had a reputation of really taking on the most complicated things.

Before answering retirement, I just want to say I'm grateful to them, because over the years, we've taken on some of the most complicated issues, whether that was changing our mental health system, or friend of the court system in the state or school reform. I mean, when I was in the State House, we had a school close, Kalkaska, early because folks wouldn't vote for property taxes. Then my superintendent in Lansing said they were going to possibly close Lansing early and my kids were in the schools. I took that on and said, "We've got to change the way we fund the system. Nobody wants to vote for increases in taxes, so let's put a deadline in the old system and create a new one," which, with a lot of complexity, ended up happening.

My staff has been involved in that every step of the way, whether it is working on a healthcare issue, a mental health issue, a school reform issue, a farm bill issue, and so on, and saying, "We want to take on the big issues, and we want to get things done that really, system-wide, make changes for people."

When I look at now in retirement, I find myself, on the one hand, thrilled to have more opportunity where I can decide when we're going to have Christmas dinner, not based on the Senate schedule, and spending time with my five fantastic grandchildren, and so proud of my son and daughter, and their families, and my brothers, and everybody. I feel very fortunate to that, but I do have to keep myself engaged just because I've been so involved in public policy my whole life.

I'm still doing some things around healthcare, still doing everything I can to make sure Michigan moves forward on behavioral health. I want to see a clinic that helps people with mental health, and addiction issues, and disability issues in every community, and so I'm supportive of the things that will allow that to happen. I'm doing a little bit of work around healthcare to try to address, at this moment, what are severe cuts coming from the current administration that are impacting our ability to actually really provide healthcare around the state. We have rural hospitals right now who aren't in a position to be able to deliver babies anymore. Imagine the UP and driving six, eight, 10 hours to be able to get to a hospital or a doctor so you can deliver your baby. I can't imagine that.

When we did the Affordable Care Act, I was a US Senator, one of the people who was deeply involved in every part of the Affordable Care Act. I authored the provision that makes women's healthcare, OBGYN, delivering a baby, women's healthcare, an essential part of healthcare. In the past, you had to get a rider. If you wanted to have your pregnancy covered, you'd have to get extra coverage from the insurance company and pay more, rather than making it part of essential coverage. Now it is. I want to make sure that every part of Michigan, women all over our state, have that support to be able to have their baby.

One of the interesting parts of the ACA debate was when a Republican colleague of mine tried to take that language out and he said, "Well, I don't want to have to have my insurance cover women's healthcare and having a baby. I'm not going to have a baby." I said back to him, "Yeah, but I bet your mom appreciated that." I mean, we're all connected here. What's happening in healthcare is something I'm keeping my eyes on, I'm staying involved with, because it's basic. It should be viewed as a right not a privilege. I want to make sure, regardless of where you are in Michigan, you can have the confidence of having a healthy baby and having the care you need, no matter who you are, and have the mental health services, addiction services that you need no matter who you are, and that that just becomes a part of what we expect.

Chuck Stokes:

Senator, you've had a lot of firsts throughout your 50-year career in public service. Are there one or two that stand out the most to you?

Senator Stabenow:

Well, first of all, I have been very blessed. Again, this is not a journey. I started to be the first. I've always said, if you are the first and there's not a second or a third, then you're just a token, and so you have to open the doors. You have to open the doors. That's what I've tried to do my whole career.

I did find myself in the '70s in local government when women were just coming into local government. In the '80s, I was in state legislature, when women were moving into state legislatures. In the '90s, beginning to run for Congresswomen, beginning to run for governor, that is what I ended up doing. Again, not realizing that was happening, but just that's how my life went. Then in 2000, the US Senate where it was the first real push to have women coming into the Senate.

In fact, in 2000 when I won, we had, for the first time, 13 women out of a hundred, and it was the first time there were enough women to have one woman on every committee in the United States Senate. Think about that. That was 2000. If I go back a ways to the State House, one of the things that's the most memorable is I decide to run for an assistant speakership. By the way, one of the things that was always done, at that time, to keep ... Sort of like you could have one woman, that's all you could have. The leaders would say, the women need to pick one person. The men wouldn't pick one person to run. They would run against each other, but somehow we were supposed to only have one of us.

I decide to run for assistant speaker. I'm elected. One of the things that had been said is that I couldn't bring to order the big room, the chambers with 110 people, I wouldn't be able to really call them to order and be able to handle the room. I was brought up to be assistant speaker and called the House to order and there was this big gavel and I just went boom, and a chip actually came out of the gavel and flew across the floor. For years after, there was this gavel with this chip in it. I would tell people, "I did that. " I will never forget that.

Speaker 3:

Keep her away from the gavels.

Senator Stabenow:

Yeah. Keep her away from the gavel. I was bound and determined that they were going to hear me calling people to order. From there on in, people didn't take me for granted in being able to do that. When I got to the Senate, I will say, the other thing that I really appreciated, again, it just kind of happened and people were encouraging me. During my first term, I became a member of the Senate Democratic Leadership, which I found out later was the first time anyone in their first term became a member of leadership. I had a lot of support at the time. Senator Harry Reid was leader and very supportive of me.

I've been blessed in a number of ways to have had an opportunity to contribute and leadership, and most of those involved a first of some kind.

Chuck Stokes:

Maybe a good way to wrap this up, Senator, is to have you talk a little bit about the tradition in Washington with the Agriculture Committee, is that once you've served as chair, then they have a procedure in which they have a portrait done of that past chair. You probably have the most unique portrait that anybody has ever hung there.

Senator Stabenow:

That's really true, Chuck. It's interesting. There's always a portrait that's done, and so we commissioned that actually by the state capitol painter, Josh, did a wonderful job. The Historical Society was wonderful in helping me make that happen. All of the portraits are traditionally sitting behind a desk, standing by a chair, looking down the mall, or the pillars of the Capitol and so on. My longtime chief of staff, Theresa, who was actually with me for 42 years ... I'm so blessed, so blessed, so blessed, since being in the State House, my first legislative hire. She said, "You should actually do a portrait that has Michigan produce in it." I said, "Well, that's great, but we grow 275 different things."

Chuck Stokes:

How do you do that?

Senator Stabenow:

How are we going to do that? We started looking at it and I thought, oh my goodness, so how do we do this? We first created a portrait, to look really like a farmer's stand, a farmer's market and me standing there. We had 80 different things we tried to get in it, and it was just too much. It didn't work. Then the question became the politics of what do you pick? Because of course we're number one in cherries, and of course we have blueberries.

Chuck Stokes:

Yeah. Leave something out, people get hurt.

Senator Stabenow:

We have all of these corn and sugar meats. I mean, I could go right around asparagus. We have all of these crops. So we got it down to, I think it was 18 or 20 and actually made it work in the portrait. We get all the way to the end, and I said, "Oh my gosh, we're number one in dairy and milk, that's our number one commodity. What do we do about that? " We tried to figure out how to put in a milk carton or something, couldn't figure that out. So, at the very end, I said, "Well, what if we could put two little

cows in the back by the water," we had a body of water and trees. I said, "What if we put two cows there to represent dairy?" We tried it and it worked.

We get to the unveiling and it was wonderful. We had several hundred people that came both from Michigan, as well as in DC, and unveiled this very different, very colorful portrait. The milk producers were some of the first ones that came up to me and they said, "We saw the cows."

Chuck Stokes:

It worked.

Senator Stabenow:

It worked. I made it. We have such diversity of crops. We are such leaders. Next to California, we have more diversity of crops. Frankly, if you count water, which we have and they don't, we are the most diverse state. I was very proud to represent them.

Chuck Stokes:

Senator, thank you so much for sitting down with us here in the Senate Appropriations Room. Thank you for your service to the State of Michigan.

Senator Stabenow:

Thank you.