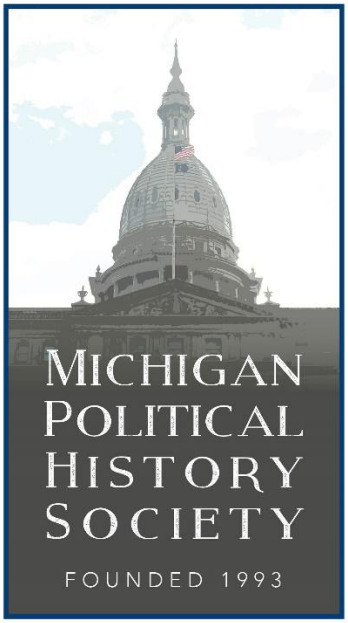
Lana Pollack

Interviewed by Laura Berman

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Laura Berman:

Hello, I'm Laura Berman, a former columnist and journalist for the Detroit News. And I'm speaking today with former state senator Lana Pollack, who served three terms, two of which were when she was the only democratic woman in the chamber, so we're here to talk about a remarkable career and life. Lana, you grew up, maybe a little surprisingly, in the small northern community of Ludington where your father owned the local grocery store. And I wonder, do you think that background helped shape your interest in the natural world and protecting the environment?

Senator Pollack:

Absolutely. We were in Lake Michigan. Lake Michigan was one of my very first memories, crossing the lake on the big car ferry when I was young enough to still be in a crib, but old enough to remember the experience. I remember a lot of rough crossings of that big lake. And Ludington is still dear in my heart. It's still home to me, and the lakes are. The lakes clearly had a big influence on me. We also had a lot of woods and deer hunting where the schools closed on the opening of Deer Hunting Day in November 17th always. And yeah, I think our environments make a big difference.

Laura Berman:

Yeah. And you grew up surrounded by natural beauty, really.

Senator Pollack:

That's right.

Laura Berman:

Some of Michigan's most impressive landscapes, probably.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. If I might add too, my mother was very active in working to expand the Ludington State Park, which is, I would say, the best state park in the country. And there was an opportunity, but not an easy one, to add some thousands of acres, and she did. And that kind of activity to protect and enhance the environment and people's experience with the environment, that made a difference.

Laura Berman:

So you did see her take a leadership role in a community activity. I didn't realize that.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. It's a small town. I don't want to say it's easier, but it's a very intimate way of being a part of a community, being a part of your government, being a part of your advocacy community. And yeah, now that you raised the issue, I think that being in a small town where there was accessibility to the people who were making the final decisions, accessibility to the decision makers, and my mother was certainly not a full-time advocate as I became, but it made a difference because it all seemed very possible.

Laura Berman:

So I don't think you thought of that as political at the time, but...

Senator Pollack:

Correct. I didn't grow up in a political family. I mean, my parents voted. And I do remember the first election that I was really aware of, that my mother voted for Stevenson and my father voted for Eisenhower. And I remember the discussions around that, but no, we did not live in a particularly political family.

Laura Berman:

You were the only Jewish family in your city.

Senator Pollack:

We were the only Jewish family that had kids in school in my generation. There were some older families, a few, a handful, because they were either the original immigrants from Eastern Europe or maybe the children of the immigrants from Eastern Europe. But by the time my father was there, and he was born there, by the time my father was raising a family, my sister, brother, and I were it in school.

Laura Berman:

Right. Was there a sense of difference or strangeness, or did it leave you with a different sense of responsibility, do you think, just having to represent, sort of?

Senator Pollack:

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I remember my mother saying, expressing, "We set an example for others. They don't know other Jewish people." I don't think we were inclined to do bad things at any rate, my brother, my sister, or I, but yeah, there was that sense.

There was also a sense of something that I didn't really understand. I think I got the feeling that it was perhaps special to be Jewish and that Jewish people had to be good. They are not all good.

Laura Berman:

We've learned that.

Senator Pollack:

But there was something that I couldn't have articulated as a child. This is right after World War II. This is right after the Holocaust. But I had a sense that maybe there was something that was a little scary, as well as special. And clearly, I was picking up the things that my parents knew and I was too young to know. But, as people do, you pick up in the air around you.

There's a story that I remember. When I was in kindergarten, I remember being out in the playground for recess in early December. It was really cold. I just remember being there. And the foster school where I went, across the street from my house, it was decorated with Christmas things in the windows. I was nervous because the teacher was asking children how they were decorating their Christmas trees. I thought, "If she comes to me, I'm going to have to say we don't have a Christmas tree." So I went home and I told my mother I wanted a Christmas tree. And she said that Christmas trees are beautiful, but it's not part of our tradition. I said, "But I want to decorate them." She was very gentle, but very firm and very respectful of the holiday, but it wasn't our holiday.

I remember a year later, I was in first grade, being out in the recess at foster school at the same time of year and the same decorations and I was shivering. And I thought, "Wasn't I silly to be afraid to be

different when I was young?" I think being different and loving the community and feeling loved by that community made a difference and allowed me to perhaps be as outspoken as I am.

Laura Berman:

And that's so interesting because that was my next thought was what was there in the air there that allowed you to... Were you outspoken at that point? Because later on, you became someone with a very strong voice. I mean, this idea that you felt comfortable being yourself and accepted even different is kind of a powerful thought.

Senator Pollack:

It is, and I don't think I realized it then. But I think that what my parents gave us was a sense of community, a sense of obligation to community, a sense of possibility, but also a sense of we are who we are and a respect for others who are different. I'm sure it gave me an added measure of self-confidence in some ways, not that I am always self-confident. But generally speaking, yeah, it made a difference. The roll of the dice was a very good one for me with my parents. I mean, every family has issues and every kid has differences with their parents, but I had a good chance of having a measure of self-confidence and a measure of commitment to the community.

Laura Berman:

Because your father played an important role in the community as feeding people.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. He had started his business during the depression. He was a very young man. His business, by the way, was in Scottville, which was even smaller. It was seven miles east of Ludington. It's a very small town, a thousand people, a farming community, which at that point, was very lively and it was pretty well off. It's not now. I've watched many communities across the middle of America and beyond lose their way when I think when there were a lot of imports from China and other government decisions that did not go well.

Laura Berman:

Walmarts.

Senator Pollack:

Walmarts, yeah. There were a lot of reasons for it, but a lot of it was poor government decisions, so I had an interest in government from quite a early age.

Laura Berman:

So you had a brother and a sister. Where were you in the birth order?

Senator Pollack:

I was third, but we were all within three years. There were three of us born in a little less than three years, so we were close in age. And different, of course, as individuals are, but really close.

Laura Berman:

Do you think, when you look back at your relatively small high school of 175, is that what it was?

Senator Pollack:

In a graduating class, yeah.

Laura Berman:

Do you think that the person you were then, I mean, would anyone have thought that you might be the person in the class who became the best known perhaps or-

Senator Pollack:

I don't know about others thinking that, but I know I didn't think that. I would say that, not surprisingly, one of the profound framework in which I was raised post-war was that girls grew up to be moms and maybe teachers, nurses, but they didn't grow up to be doctors except rarely. And they were elementary school principals, but they weren't high school principals. They weren't the lawyers. They weren't the bankers, except they were the lawyers' secretaries. So no, I did not have the imagination that would have made me think in the scope that I eventually did, but I didn't feel left out then either. It just was.

Laura Berman:

It just was, right.

Senator Pollack:

It just was.

Laura Berman:

But you did go to college. And presumably, you headed to Ann Arbor in 1960, which was probably just a little bit before there were a lot of feminist stirrings at all. What were you thinking of becoming at that point? You were going to higher education. Was it with a career in mind? Was it with finding a husband?

Senator Pollack:

I assumed that I would be married, and indeed I was. Much earlier than I found a career, I found a husband. I met my husband before classes even started when I was a freshman. As I said, before classes started, he was a graduate student working as a dorm counselor, and he brought his freshman boys over to meet the freshman girls, and he met me.

Then, just to make another point, I believe that chance in life is really important. By chance, we had each purchased from our homes, he coming from Nebraska and me from Ludington, 10 concerts in the series called the Choral Union Series at Hill Auditorium at the University of Michigan campus, and he was seated right behind me for 10 concerts.

Laura Berman:

So you saw him 10 times that way?

Senator Pollack:

Well, he saw the back of my head for about six concerts, and then asked me out for coffee. I did not... What did I think? I was surprised that there was a girl, we never said woman, there was a girl at the end of my dorm hall that was in the school of engineering. She was one of two freshmen. I thought, "Girls can be engineers?"

Laura Berman:

You were learning all kinds of things.

Senator Pollack:

I was learning all kinds of things at Michigan. But I got married in the middle of my junior year when my husband, when Henry, took off for Harvard for a postdoc. And in those days, you didn't go-

Laura Berman:

He was a graduate student in what?

Senator Pollack:

Geophysics.

Laura Berman:

He got his PhD in Geophysics?

Senator Pollack:

Geology, geophysics, right. And so I went to Harvard, we had a baby, came back, I had another baby, and finished school, did a master's degree. By the time I was starting some graduate courses, the war and the anti-Vietnam War movement, the civil rights movement, even the beginnings of the modern women's movement, the environmental movements, all of those were rising. And with it, my awareness of the world, what was wrong and what might be fixed, that became more and more a part of who I was. And with it an awareness that, oh, I can do some other things, but I was pretty slow. I was slow. I was looking at my 40th birthday before I really caught on to what I could do and what I could be.

Laura Berman:

When you interrupted your education to go live in... Were you living in Cambridge or...

Senator Pollack:

We couldn't afford Cambridge, but we lived in-

Laura Berman:

Nearby.

Senator Pollack:

We lived in Boston.

Laura Berman:

I mean, were you worried about interrupting your education, that you wouldn't be able to finish it? Was there any sense of choice or risk involved, or was it just-

Senator Pollack:

No, sort of. But mainly, I let those concerns be expressed by my mother, "You are going to finish school." And I said, "Of course I'm going to finish school," and I meant it.

Laura Berman:

Because you were young. You were 20.

Senator Pollack:

I was 20 when I got married, but a degree was something you just did in my family. You just would get an education, but a profession was something that my brother would do.

Laura Berman:

I understand.

Senator Pollack:

There was very gender defined roles in my family, not that my family ever said I couldn't do something. There were just expectations, and I didn't have the imagination, nor did I apparently have the role models, which is something I came to believe were very important.

Laura Berman:

There weren't a lot around at that time of women who occupied-

Senator Pollack:

No, women in non-traditional... yeah.

Laura Berman:

Right. There just weren't. When you first got to Michigan, was it intimidating or exciting? I mean, you were coming from a pretty small place.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah, it was a little intimidating. I remember being in an English class, actually a great books class, and students had read all these books. I didn't even know they existed, so yeah. But I hadn't had a poor education in Ludington. In fact, in some ways I had great opportunities. But yes, the answer intellectually, academically. And then I married a man who would become a professor, and I got just steeped and also began to see professors as real people.

Laura Berman:

So you were kind of thrust into a intellectual and academic environment that seeped into your whole life, really.

Senator Pollack:

That's right. Yeah, yeah. And I was thrust into it quite young. And because of my husband's, who was six years older, position, I had opportunities that I didn't think I would, and it was great.

Laura Berman:

So you had a master's degree in teaching, but you found it very difficult, even with that extra degree, to get any work as a teacher full-time in Ann Arbor.

Senator Pollack:

That's true, but it was primarily demographics. The school population in Ann Arbor in those years was actually getting smaller. They were trying to have some teachers retire, and not fast enough for my interests so I didn't get a job. They weren't hiring, but I was a substitute teacher for three challenging years while I was waiting to find a way into the-

Laura Berman:

Full-time employment.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. I love teaching. And I think if I had gotten a teaching position as a social studies teacher in high school, I think that would have been my career. Maybe I would have become a principal, but I think it was the chance of demographics that squeezed me out of that professional pathway, I was open when the opportunity came along for a political career.

Laura Berman:

You have described yourself as a late bloomer in terms of realizing your recognition of the gender biases, seeing the women's movement, and of your own potential. I just wondered when you see yourself as a late bloomer, was there a blooming? Was that with these late 60s and so on, or was it more of a gradual thing?

Senator Pollack:

It was both gradual and sudden. So in the 60s, I became much more aware of things that I'd already known: that black people, we would have said colored people then, didn't have a fair shot even in the north. But we had made one trip to the South where I saw the signs and all the horror. I mean, I had some awareness, but believe me, I didn't have deep awareness. But the civil rights movement was a, "Yeah, of course, that has to be changed."

The environmental movement and the women's movement, I think the women's movement came last to me. First, easy, I was, of course, part, in my head, of the civil rights movement. Secondly, and I remember catching on to the anti-war movement because I remember particular classrooms where I was listening carefully, "Could our country be wrong?"

I also had had a summer, after my sophomore year at Michigan, I'd gone to Mexico to learn political science there, just for the summer, and Spanish. I was shocked at, "Oh, they said that we were this colonial power that had done bad things." I hadn't thought of that, hadn't recognized that. So I came back from that experience into this rising sense of both protest and reform in this country.

But the last one for me to pick up on was the women's movement because I personally didn't feel aggrieved. I didn't realize how limited I had been. In 1970, '71, my husband, and therefore the family, had a sabbatical, and we moved away pretty much at the peak of the anger, the protest in the '70s. We came back in the fall of '71, things were quieter there. I made a joke about consciousness-raising groups, and Rosalie and other friends didn't find it funny at all. They had moved on.

Again, I was not a leader. It took me a while to recognize that the limitations and the restrictions and the cultural, I will say, misfortunate glitches applied to women.

Laura Berman:

Discrimination.

Senator Pollack:

Discrimination very much applied to women. And once I caught on...

Laura Berman:

Boy, did you, yes.

Senator Pollack:

... I never closed that book.

Laura Berman:

You had two children, Sarah and John. And in 1978, you had a personal tragedy when you lost your daughter. She died in an accident overseas. Obviously, a life-changing, horrible time in your life, but you told me that the purpose of life doesn't die with tragedy. I thought that was a really meaningful statement. I think because that was not long before you began your political career, I wonder how that affected you in terms of moving forward with your life as opposed to, say, being mired in grief, which is also a possibility in a situation like that.

Senator Pollack:

It's very much a possibility. I feel that our son, my husband, and I have been very successful in living with grief. You don't get over it. You don't forget about it, Lord knows. But you learn if you're successful, and I wanted to be successful, that the grief doesn't fill your world. It's a part of who you are. It never goes away, but it isn't the totality, because that would be a waste of life. It would be a terrible waste of life.

I think I would have been less successful. I'm quite sure I would have been less successful if we didn't have... Our son was 12. He had suffered a terrible loss. He needed support. His parents needed to give him that support. And if we were incapacitated and totally mired in grief, if we didn't leave room for hope and excitement of a young, almost teenager, what chance did he have?

It didn't make me political, but learning to deal with something extremely difficult, because I'd had a really good ride in life up to then. I mean, there are people who are traumatized as children and have to deal with that, all sorts of things. I didn't have any of that. I just had good things. I don't know. It didn't change the trajectory of my interests, but it did make me aware, and actually surprised me, that I could live a rich life even as I carried this heavy burden. It didn't stop me, that I had a life to live, and we did it. We did it. It made me a different person, but as I said, I don't know how much it changed my political-

Laura Berman:

The trajectory of your professional life.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah, right.

Laura Berman:

But you did, not long after, run for a school board, is that right?

Senator Pollack:

I did. I did. In fact, a year later, I ran for the school board. I came back and I was a mother, like the PTO mother involved. Our daughter had been an activist as a sixth grader. She'd been one of the kids who helped promote and help establish a open classroom middle school experience, so I was involved as a mother. And then I had been doing all the substitute teaching, so I was in all these junior high, they were kind of in transition then, and the high schools. I was in all those schools. I had opinions. I saw how they worked. I saw how they didn't work.

At some point, I think I thought, "Well, if I can't get a job at the bottom of the ladder in these schools, I'll go for a job at the top." I ran for the school board, and it was a terrific experience. I was very engaged. I learned to be confident in making decisions about budgets that had lots of zeros after them.

Laura Berman:

You were elected in the middle of a huge national controversy, weren't you?

Senator Pollack:

I was. The first school board meeting I went to, I knew would have some media there, some press there. It was chock-a-block with cameras from the three big national networks, let alone the local and Michigan people. All right, so what was it? It was what was known as the Black English Case. It was a court case had been brought by an advocacy group on behalf of a number of children who lived in public housing, but were part of a grade school that was in pretty fancy-smancy neighborhoods. There were several charges that were brought against the school district in terms of trying to understand what the school district was not doing or was doing, causing a high failure rate among these children academically.

The judge, Judge Joiner, who was a Reagan appointee, a conservative judge, had thrown out all the charges except one. And he considered whether the-

Laura Berman:

He was a federal judge, wasn't he? Federal district judge?

Senator Pollack:

He was a federal, Ronald Reagan, and conservative, or considered conservative. He agreed to consider whether the fact that these children in public housing primarily lived with a language that was somewhat different than standard English. And he concluded, yes, it was something that needed to be addressed.

Laura Berman:

There should be an accommodation.

Senator Pollack:

Well, not an accommodation. There should be an understanding how to teach better. It was definitely not saying that they should use anything other than standard English. That was taken-

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:31:04]

Senator Pollack:

... Use anything other than standard English. That really twisted what the judge was saying.

Laura Berman:

I remember reporting that suggested that.

Senator Pollack:

The whole thing was full of anger and disappointment and hurt. I think the teachers were good teachers. I know they were good people. They felt that they were being accused of being racists, which was again, not the point. In the end, I was part of a majority, a liberal majority. It was a nonpartisan school board race, as most of them are. But there were liberals and conservatives, and the liberals of which I was one, had just taken control of the school board. That was the first election with a new majority. And we eventually voted not to appeal, which meant we accepted the judge's requirement that the teachers have a number of hours of teaching, their teaching skills specific to this challenge that these children had. In the end, people were so caught up on both sides, I think, of the fight that the kids got lost. And I'm not sure that anything great was accomplished, at least on behalf of those children, though maybe perhaps others going forward.

Laura Berman:

Was there any lesson that you learned about politics from that?

Senator Pollack:

Oh, I learned so much being on the school board. And I learned, like I said, that people would get caught up in the argument rather than, is there a real issue here and how can we best do it? I learned things about labor relations where there was a strike and I think as management, I don't think I did well by the teachers. It's not how much they were given. It was just the whole... I just learned so much. I learned how to, as I said, work with budgets and I learned from my husband early on. He said, "Because you're dealing with things that are so big compared to your household budget." Early on Hank said, "Just look at the relationships of these numbers. If you're spending 75% of the budget on personnel and 20% of those personnel are not in the classroom, is that a good... Think of relationships of numbers and think down the road in terms of numbers."

Laura Berman:

So that was good advice.

Senator Pollack:

That was great advice. I just learned a lot. I also learned to-

Laura Berman:

Speak up.

Senator Pollack:

... speak up. The first night at that black English case with all the cameras and everything, I had thought I wouldn't speak that night because I was brand new, but of course that didn't work so well for me. I listened and listened and about 10 o'clock at night, I offered a suggestion that perhaps we could move back from the fut and think more of is there a way to help children outside of this court case? And afterwards, two different members of the board who had more experience than I both said, "I'm so glad

you said that, Lana." And I just said, "Thank you." But I though, "Well, why didn't you say it?" And that became a theme of my public service.

Laura Berman:

That you would say the unspoken.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. And that there were a lot of people who held the position who were smart, who did know things, but even people who have whatever it takes to run for office sometimes get there and they're still shy or unwilling to take the heat of saying what they think might be helpful. There's a lot that goes unsaid and sometimes too much that goes said. I learned a lot. Yeah, I learned a whole lot.

Laura Berman:

So it wasn't that long after. How many terms on the school board did you-

Senator Pollack:

Ann Arbor had a weird three-year term and I just ran one term and then I was looking at 40 years old. I was a little bit beyond the immediate trauma of our daughter's death and I though I'm going to get a real job. Up until then I'd been a dance teacher and a substitute teacher and I thought I'm going to get a real job. And so I planned not to run for the school board again, that I was going to go out and meet the world.

Laura Berman:

Meet the world. And you did it in a somewhat unexpected way because you made the decision to run for State Senate.

Senator Pollack:

I did and no one was more surprised than me. And I said that was not in my mind. I hadn't had encouragement to do so. I didn't have the ambition. I didn't have the imagination again to do so. But I was asked by a friend and a colleague who had worked with me on campaigns. And I have to say, I worked on a lot of campaigns.

Laura Berman:

That's important.

Senator Pollack:

I had done a lot of volunteer work in politics in the preceding decade. I'd learned a lot. I gained confidence and I cared. I cared a lot about who won elections. It mattered. He asked me would I run his campaign for the State Senate seat and I said, "No, I want to get a real job. I want to get a paycheck. I'm not going to run another campaign."

Laura Berman:

He tried to persuade you.

Senator Pollack:

He tried to persuade me. He said, "Lana, you have credibility with teachers." Because I'd been on the school board in spite of my stumble during the strike, they mostly liked me and I liked them. "You have credibility with the teachers and I need that credibility. You have credibility with women and I need that credibility. You have credibility with Democrats and I need that credibility," because I'd worked in all those things and it was driving up the next... And I said, "I don't want to run your campaign." He said, "Come back. Take two days, take three days, take a few days and then come back and tell me." And so I was driving up between Ann Arbor and Ludington somewhere in I-96 near Grand Rapids I said I had in my head alone.

Laura Berman:

You were thinking it over.

Senator Pollack:

I was thinking it over. I have credibility with the teachers. I have credibility. It was like bingo, eureka, light bulb, why don't I run? I came back and I told him, "Sorry, I can't do your campaign. I'm going to run." I did and I won.

Laura Berman:

There you go.

Senator Pollack:

There I go. But it took a long time for me to think of myself in some situation that was not a traditional female role.

Laura Berman:

It was remarkable because... So he ended up not running, is that right?

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. We agreed that we would call some people and ask which among us would be the best candidate, not who you like the best, not who would be the best senator.

Laura Berman:

Who would have the most likelihood of winning.

Senator Pollack:

Winning, and we called the first person. It was Jean King, which was remarkable that he didn't veto-

Laura Berman:

Was like an Ann Arbor politician and feminist, ran the NOW chapter maybe? No?

Senator Pollack:

No, more than that. She was a lawyer with a incredible history.

Laura Berman:

Lawyer, that's right.

Senator Pollack:

She'd taken the case that began to enforce Title IX for women. I mean, she was intimidating to me. She was wonderful. Anyway, we called, Jean said, "Oh, Lana, of course." And so Bob and I, it was Bob Alexander who worked well in Lansing, a good friend. We decided I would run, he would support me. I would hire him if I won, when I won. And I did.

Laura Berman:

And it all happened.

Senator Pollack:

And it all happened. Timing, chance, and also a lot of background that led up to that.

Laura Berman:

You won, but what kind of early political lessons were there in that race? Who was your opponent?

Senator Pollack:

There were a lot of lessons in that race and it was fun, but it was stressful. Oh, boy. All right. So first I had to win the primary and the primary that year already had three other credible Democratic candidates. I mean, they all had something to recommend them and some footholds and they'd all had a head start on me because I was a little late getting started. I do remember the first issue was of my own making and it was a big mistake. I was giving a talk. I still can remember it. It was at the Michigan Union and I got really comfortable with this group, with this audience. And for some unknown reason, I thought it was a good idea to mention the fact that when I'd been on the school board for three years, I hadn't really said the pledge of allegiance to the flag.

At the beginning of the school board meetings, we would all rise. I would rise. I'd face the flag like everybody else. The man who stood next to me was a Jehovah's Witness. I think for two reasons, one in solidarity with him and the other one was because I always felt that people shouldn't be forced to say anything even no matter how meritorious the statements were. I had never made a fuss about it. I'd stand, look at the flag with him and everybody else and my lips weren't moving. No one had noticed that, said anything. It wasn't an issue I was trying to make. I was, I think, testing to see is this really a free country? Does freedom to speak mean freedom to be silent? Anyway, I said some short version of that to this group at the union and there was a really good reporter there.

He was a pro from the Ann Arbor News. The next day, "Candidate doesn't say the pledge to the flag." And that became a big deal. Particularly, it was incomprehensible to... Part of the district was Ann Arbor, the biggest part of the district. I was likely to do pretty well here. Secondary, in terms of size and importance in the Democratic primary was the Ypsilanti Township, the Eastern part, which is besides Eastern Michigan University, has a big blue collar Labor and a great number of people, especially then who were first, second generation, who'd come up from the south to work in the Willow Run bomber plant during the war. Any rate, it was incomprehensible to them and not very attractive. I had to get past that, which eventually I did.

There were all sorts of speculations as to why I didn't say the pledge. As you can see, I can't explain it very quickly. I won the primary at any rate and I had 51% in a four-way primary, so that was good. Again, I go back to the teachers were really helpful throughout the county and we ran a good campaign. And I

just worked so hard and I was so excited to win that primary. Then in the general, it was a barely leaning Democratic district, really a, it could go either way district. The Republican candidate that I would face was Roy Smith. Roy Smith had been a state house person moving up to the Senate and he had also been a county commissioner. He was a good old boy and a nice guy.

Laura Berman:

Had some name recognition.

Senator Pollack:

He had name recognition and he crossed the party lines because he'd been around a long time. Yeah, he was a good guy, but he was happy to exploit the flag issue, which I had gifted him. So I won the general election in November with 51.5% of the vote. So I didn't blow it out of the water, but there wasn't a reason for a recount and it was a very exciting thing. Yeah.

Laura Berman:

Yeah. Do you remember your first day walking into that chamber or...

Senator Pollack:

Before I walked into the chamber, which I do remember the... It's awesome. It's beautiful. The chandeliers, the architecture, the size, the scope.

Laura Berman:

It's impressive.

Senator Pollack:

It bespeaks power is what it does. But before that, we had to take a vote on leadership and we the Democrats had a one vote-

Laura Berman:

Wait, they swore you in before or they don't swear you in before? Or that's a party thing?

Senator Pollack:

That's a party thing. That's a party thing.

Laura Berman:

Okay.

Senator Pollack:

Although I was also sworn in before the official swearing in.

Laura Berman:

I see.

Senator Pollack:

As was everybody else individually. But yeah, it's a party thing. So you have to vote on who's going to be the leader. Now, it had been an all Republican Senate for a very long time, but this was 19-

Laura Berman:

'82 turning to '83?

Senator Pollack:

This was '82. The '82 elections, so in '83, for the first time and for the only time for the next 40 years, there was a Democratic governor, a House, a Senate, Attorney General. So the Democrats had swept, but there was only 19. It's what it took for a majority. There were only 19 Democrats and everybody knew how the others were going to vote for the leadership. There was a fight between, or contest, fight, between Labor's Choice, who was Gary Corbin, really a good, solid, fine public servant, and Bill Faust, who was not Labor's Choice, but he was the choice of the multi-client lobbyist. Jimmy Karoub would have been the king. King Karoub, they called him. All right. So I had people who I'd only read about in the paper. All these people were calling me and wanting to meet with me and take me to lunch. And of course they wanted my votes for Labor or for...

Laura Berman:

Lobby.

Senator Pollack:

Or lobby, right. They were all lobbying, but anyway, yes. Yes, indeed. And I was listening to one and I was listening to the other, and I really didn't know. I thought they were both good guys, and frankly, either one of them would have been, I think, a good leader. In the end, I cast my secret ballot for... It wasn't secret because everybody knew who everybody else was voting for, and they were waiting for my vote, and my vote was for Bill Faust. I think probably as I thought about it a lot, even after the fact, because I really liked Gary, I liked Bill.

I didn't know which one would be better, but Faust had two things going for him. One, he had been in a car accident when he'd been forced off the road into something that paralyzed him from the waist down. He was in a wheelchair. I don't know that it was ever proven, but the understanding was that Bill Faust had been a reporter and was uncovering some corruption in Michigan, and that he had been forced off the road into that accident. I may have had some extra sympathy for him because of his-

Laura Berman:

Situation.

Senator Pollack:

... situation. The other thing is that Ed Pierce, who had been the predecessor in that district, liked Faust, and he was one of the people leaning on me. I got pretty clear of thinking Ed knows more than I because he's here and I'm just new. But at that time, in the very first vote, before it was really officially sworn in, he had some influence. So I went for Faust. What that meant, and I didn't-

Laura Berman:

Unintended consequences?

Senator Pollack:

It had unintended consequences in two ways. One, he put me on the Appropriations Committee. No one as a freshman ever got that, but that was my reward. I didn't know I was going to get rewarded for something, but I was. And the other thing is that-

Laura Berman:

Which was a powerful committee, Appropriations. Yeah.

Senator Pollack:

It was. Yes. It was so powerful that the lobbyists, even some of them invited me to play golf and I couldn't play golf. But as we go forward in time, we did not keep the majority. The Democrats did not keep that majority to full term. And you know what? Once I wasn't in the majority and not a member of Appropriation, no one ever asked me to play golf with them again. Funniest thing.

Laura Berman:

Go figure.

Senator Pollack:

Go figure. Yeah. So the other thing that was a consequence of that, my vote for Bill, is that A, we had a good leader. And B, really, I got a call from Sam Fishman. Sam Fishman was the political head of the UAW in Lansing. And in those days, I want to tell you, even more than these days, Labor was-

Laura Berman:

King.

Senator Pollack:

... king. I mean, really powerful in Lansing in ways that it's influential now, but not nearly what it was in the '80s. I got a call from Sam Fishman, and he wanted to see me, came over to see me, and before I could even point to a seat and have him say hello and how are you doing and congratulations, he came at me with a big blast. I mean, a big blast. Said I had broken my promise, betrayed them. Because at the last week of the campaign before I won the... No, before I won the election, before I won the election. My campaign had decided, and I had agreed, that it could be close and we needed a big buy in the Ann Arbor news. We took out five pages of $1,000 a page for that. No one had ever advertised like that. It was big. But we decided to do it, and I pointed out, "We don't have the money to do it." Then my campaign people said, "Lana, call Sam." It wasn't the guy who does the slip and fall. This was call Sam-

Laura Berman:

Fishman.

Senator Pollack:

... Fishman. And I did, and he said, "You do what you need to do. If you come out short, we'll make it up." Well, he came over at me, "We gave you this money. You didn't vote for our guy." I was shocked and insulted and naive and said, "Well, I didn't make any deal. I make up my own mind on my own votes." We went back and forth and back and forth, and boy, my staff could hear it through the walls.

Laura Berman:

None of them anticipated this reaction?

Senator Pollack:

My staff?

Laura Berman:

Yeah.

Senator Pollack:

Maybe Bob did, but I had five people and three of them were new to Lansing. I'm sure they didn't expect it. I didn't expect it. I mean, what did I know? But time passed, they needed my vote. And besides that, I'm a good Labor vote. I was like, "I would be, again, a good Labor vote," except when they get crossways with the environment.

Laura Berman:

But this was the first vote and you voted against them.

Senator Pollack:

And this was the first vote, and it was an important vote to them, and I voted against them. It took a little time and things get better.

Laura Berman:

So that was part of the education of Lana Pollack.

Senator Pollack:

That was just the beginning of the education. Right.

Laura Berman:

Yeah. So when I asked you about coming into that chamber, I was thinking about, it was a room full of men. Was there any woman there at that point?

Senator Pollack:

Yeah, there was, Connie Binsfeld-

Laura Berman:

Was a Republican.

Senator Pollack:

... was a Republican. She was elected the same year I was. She was not eager to have coffee or anything else with me, because I think she thought that if we were seen... Already we were seen as weird, and if we got together, oh my God-

Laura Berman:

They're plotting.

Senator Pollack:

If one woman is dangerous, two would be just way too dangerous. And there were, of course, women's staff, but it was very, very, very much a men's room. And in many ways, a men's locker room.

Laura Berman:

Did you feel unwelcome or what was-

Senator Pollack:

No, not so much unwelcome. I felt that they felt that I was odd, that I was different. And it was really primarily just because women were different. And I had always thought that being a woman was normal. It's who I was. The gender issue was more important than I had anticipated. I wasn't totally unaware, but it was... Yeah. And the first week-

Laura Berman:

It had been their club, really, more or less, for a long time.

Senator Pollack:

It had been their club, and there were certain things that happened that reminded me how different I was. The first week, I happened to be standing with three or four different senators. I remember Senator Gast was there, a Republican. And I remember that Senator Faxon was there and somebody else. And so we just happened to be chatting, not on the floor, just somewhere in the Capitol. And a woman, one of the rare women lobbyists came up and introduced us to a third party and said, "This is Senator Faxon, and this is Senator Gast and this is Senator Miller, and this is Lana." I said, "That's Senator Pollack." She said, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I have a hard time calling you Senator." I said, "Practice." So it wasn't just the men, it was occasionally women. I was just different. It meant that women came to me because I did carry certain authority-

Laura Berman:

Credibility.

Senator Pollack:

... or credibility, power. I mean, I didn't feel I had, but... Well, I did feel I had power because senators were important and they though they were important and people treated them as important. And we did have. People in office have power.

Laura Berman:

Sure.

Senator Pollack:

They may not use it well, and they don't have all the power, but yes. Women would come up and say, they'd tell me about some sexual harassment. One time, just after the session was over, I was still on the floor gathering my papers and a young woman from the Michigan State newspaper, and these young reporters were good.

Laura Berman:

State News. The State News.

Senator Pollack:

The State News.

Laura Berman:

There you go.

Senator Pollack:

Thank you, yes. And they were professionals. They were young professionals, but they were professionals. They were reporting. And this woman dashes out of the press box, which she could do because we had adjourned, and she blurted out that one of the senators had said something that was sexist and insulting. She said to me, "Tell him he can't do that," or something to that effect. And I thought, "This is not going to end well for me." The guy was clearly guilty and obnoxious, but you correct somebody in the wrong way, they make you pay because they're embarrassed that you've seen it. And to be embarrassed in front of a woman was apparently a really bad thing. I had things like that. I had another situation which ended much better, which was the woman who was number two at the Library of Michigan.

The Library of Michigan has this unusual arrangement where it reports directly to the... Its governing body is the Senate, not the Senate and the House, but just the Senate. And she came to me and said that she was number two. She was a professional. I mean, a longtime professional librarian, and because she turned down the librarian's overtures for inappropriate relation, he had had her shelving books. And she said to me, "Do you think I should sue?" And I'm very careful before I tell anybody to either get a divorce or sue, because what do I know? I'm not going to carry the consequences of this, but I listened carefully and I talked maybe about the pros and cons or whatever. Two years later, I read that she had sued, she'd won a million dollars, and that she credited me with encouraging her. I don't get the credit, but at least it's not the blame.

Laura Berman:

That's interesting. That sexual harassment law was only a few years old then. It was in the late '70s, I think, '78 or something.

Senator Pollack:

Well, some people had not caught on that it was the law.

Laura Berman:

Right, because it was very new.

Senator Pollack:

Yes. There was another story about Senator Mack, a Democrat from the UP. He was a good Democratic vote usually, but he could be coarse and I knew what he said about me. It was so coarse. It was just-

Laura Berman:

You can't tell us what it was?

Senator Pollack:

I won't say it. No, it's too disgusting.

Laura Berman:

Okay. But someone had told you?

Senator Pollack:

But somebody had told me, and I don't even think he should have told me. Well, I'm glad he did because I knew how much I disliked Joe Mack then. But previous to that, I'd tried to be nice. I was going to be nice. I was going to be friends to him. I brought him cookies on his birthday, then I heard this. And it happened that I was on the floor during a break. I was over at Phil Arthurhultz's desk because he was the floor manager then. And there were a few Democrats, a few Republicans.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [01:02:04]

Senator Pollack:

A few Democrats, a few Republicans say, "We're talking about a bill. Is it going to move? When are you going to bring it up?" Whatever. Joe Mack comes up to me, to the group, and he just puts his hand on my shoulder, which is not a bad thing in most cases. It's fine. And I said to him, "Take your hand off me, Joe." And he said, he was kind of hard of hearing at any rate, but he heard me, and the conversation stopped among this Bill conversation we were having.

"Take your hand off me, Joe."

"What did you say?"

And I looked over and I saw Pam Nyquist, who was a friend and a senior female staffer who had been around and heard a lot of things from a lot of people in the Senate, and her mouth was ... jaw was dropped. And I said, "You heard me, Joe. Don't you ever touch me again."

Laura Berman:

Do you think he knew what that was about?

Senator Pollack:

I bet he did.

Laura Berman:

I think he did.

Senator Pollack:

I bet he did. I mean, he was grosser than most, but other people-

Laura Berman:

Were also gross.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. There was a-

Laura Berman:

It's hard to even remember what it was like there.

Senator Pollack:

... a labor guy who planted a wet kiss on my mouth before God knew what was happening. I mean, I could go through these things.

Laura Berman:

There were a lot.

Senator Pollack:

There was a lot.

Laura Berman:

Did anyone ever underestimate you to your advantage?

Senator Pollack:

No, that's a good question. I don't think so, because I've thought about was there an advantage to this nonsense? And I want to also say, I had friends, there were good people. Faust, our leader, was very, he was not only appropriate, he was generous, he was ... And the same with Art Miller who followed him. Yes. But yeah, I don't ...

Okay. I'll tell one more story. And I did make progress with these people, my colleagues. And for most of them-

Laura Berman:

They were fine?

Senator Pollack:

And it got better. The more we knew each other, the more I knew, it was good. But I was made, in that first caucus meeting where I voted for Bill Faust, I was made the vice chair of the caucus, vice chair. Now, the only thing the caucus vice chair did was if the caucus chair was, not the caucus leader, but just chair of the caucus, when he didn't show up for a meeting, and those meetings were closed, occasionally staff would be involved, but mostly you close that door and it was all men and me. It was 19 of us, 18 of the men and me.

And yeah, David Holmes was missing that day. He was the caucus leader. I was in charge, or so I thought. We started on an issue and there were a lot of hands went up and they wanted to talk and clearly it was motivating people to issue their appointments. And Basil Brown starts talking over somebody who I recognized. And I banged the gavel and I said, "You're not recognized, Senator Brown." And he keeps talking and the other senator's trying to talk. And I banged the gavel again. I said, "You are not recognized." And he's talking and he said, "Well, when will I be recognized?" "You will be recognized when the Chair recognizes you, Senator."

And it was so good because earlier in the sessions that preceded that caucus where it was all men and just me, there were people there who were apologizing if they disagreed with me. They were really afraid to disagree with me. They did not know how to treat or deal with a woman who was an equal. And they weren't being mean, but it was not going to work out well. I mean, if they thought of me as their grandmother or their-

Laura Berman:

Someone they couldn't rely on.

Senator Pollack:

Well, they couldn't even fight with fairly. They had to take me as somehow an equal. And that exchange with Basil Brown and everybody like that, it was really helpful. And so were other things. You go along, I learned, they learned, and it was a learning experience.

Laura Berman:

You ran again, won again, and you were term limited, right? After three terms?

Senator Pollack:

No, I wasn't term limited.

Laura Berman:

You were not?

Senator Pollack:

That was before term limits.

Laura Berman:

Okay.

Senator Pollack:

Well ...

Laura Berman:

It's 90 ...

Senator Pollack:

That was before. I could have run again.

Laura Berman:

You're right, it was before.

Senator Pollack:

I could have run again. Yes.

Laura Berman:

But there were three terms.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. I did two things though. It had taken me a long time to recognize that I could run for anything. And eventually I decided I could accomplish anything in a positive sense. So it was the end of the '86 or the end of the Reagan years. Democrats thought, "It's going to be a great year. We're going to really take things on." And I ran for the House, US House. I ran against Carl Purcell and it was a Dukakis year. We did not do well. I ran ahead of the ticket, but I didn't win. And then four years later I decided to run, that there would be an open Senate seat and I would run for that. And that was '94.

Laura Berman:

Before we get to that, I'd like to talk about your signature legislation, which I see as the Polluter Pay legislation.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah.

Laura Berman:

Which apparently they also called the Pollack Polluter Pay legislation.

Senator Pollack:

They did.

Laura Berman:

Some people did.

Senator Pollack:

Some people did. Right. But in the end it wasn't Pollack Polluter Pay legislation, although I really authored it, but the Republicans liked it, came to really like it, think it was an advantage politically. I worked very closely with the Republican who by then were the majority party in that Senate. I worked very closely with Vern Ahlers, a really smart PhD scientist, Republican Senator from Grand Rapids. And together we sat for six weeks frequently with General Motor, all the autos and Dow and the chemical people and as well as the Municipal League, all the different interests who could possibly be there.

Laura Berman:

Getting input and trying to put a bill together?

Senator Pollack:

Getting input, and we did. I'd been working on those bills for seven years by then.

Laura Berman:

Remind us what the point and reason for those were.

Senator Pollack:

The point was, as the nickname implies, that the polluters would have liability for causing the damage to the environment and public health. And if you could show who created the pollution or who profited from the pollution, and that was an important point, maybe they were not dumping the pollution, but they were trucking the stuff, they were making money off of it. So anybody who was making money off of something that was polluting and was outside the law, would have to be a part of paying to clean it up.

That did two things. One, once it passed, it brought in a hundred million dollars in five years for cleanup, which in 1990 was real money. It still is, but it did something equally important. It caused people to proceed with their current activities in a way that didn't cause pollution because they knew they would be liable if they did cause pollution.

We had those meetings. I mean, not all the interests were crazy about it, but it was considered fair. It was also considered the most effective law in the country in that regard.

Laura Berman:

And you somehow got, and Republicans were willing to sign onto it at that point.

Senator Pollack:

They not only were willing to sign onto it, I came back from the ... We had the agreement and then we had a summer break in August. So on the first day back after the August break, I came back knowing that the bills drafters had completed their work. There were I think seven bills. And my idea was that Vern would take the lead signature on this bill and I would do the other bill and vice versa. And I heard from a lobbyist, not from Vern or any other person who might have told me, "Oh, those are already signed." And they had about eight Republicans at the beginning of every single bill, my bills. It had never been done. There has been suggestion that it would never have been done to a male senator, but they did it.

And they did that because John Engler was getting ready, he hoped and thought and did run against Jim Blanchard for Jim's third, what would have been his third term as governor of Michigan, and John felt that he and his Republicans had a bad reputation on environmental issues and he was going to find something that worked. And so they never came to the bill signing, which Jim Blanchard signed on the banks of the Huron River. It was still in a sense my bill, but I mean I signed somewhere-

Laura Berman:

In there?

Senator Pollack:

... in there.

Laura Berman:

Weren't you a lead sponsor though?

Senator Pollack:

Not really.

Laura Berman:

No?

Senator Pollack:

Not officially, but I was so associated with it that there was no disassociating. It was irritating. It was aggravating, but the bills went through. I was thrilled. I'm still thrilled. Five years later, they were successful. John Engler now was governor and he had the bills gutted. So after five years, they changed the standard for cancer risk. They changed the liability standards. Michigan does not have polluter pay and people went back to polluting without any liability.

Laura Berman:

At that point, the Republicans had control of both houses probably, or?

Senator Pollack:

I ...

Laura Berman:

Hard to say.

Senator Pollack:

Well, they certainly had control of the Senate. They had the governor. Yeah, I just remember there wasn't John Engler. John Engler was the most talented politician that I ever knew. Perhaps he was challenged in that by Gary Owen, who had been the speaker of the House, but the two of them were amazing. They got their way. Now Gary chose not to stay. He chose to leave to become a lobbyist and do well financially, but he was good and John was good. And by that I meant they were good in knowing how to work the system. And that's not a bad thing. I just think that John Engler's efforts were often pointed in the wrong direction, but I respect his talent and what he could do.

Laura Berman:

Because he got his way. And do you think that he ... You're implying or suggesting that he actually foresaw that one day he would be governor and he didn't believe in the bills, he just thought that he needed them to get elected.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. And I don't know that he planned to undo them, but he did have them rolled back. But the bills were effective. They're still trying to pass bills now, but the ones that have failed to pass aren't nearly as strong as or wouldn't be as effective as the ones that were Michigan law-

Laura Berman:

For a while.

Senator Pollack:

For a while. So I thank you for asking me about that, but I do want to make the point that I worked really hard on legislation. It wasn't all about funny stories or it wasn't about the caucus who held their ... my caucus who held their meeting at the Playboy Club in Lansing. It wasn't all about those stories. I was busy passing legislation and did work with some Republicans because there wasn't a great deal of

bipartisan work, but compared to where we are today in 2026, there was much more capacity to work across the aisle and find votes.

Laura Berman:

Well, just think about passing a major environmental bill. That's hard to imagine today.

Senator Pollack:

Yes. Well, for one thing, we were just coming off the 14 years of Bill Milliken being Michigan's Republican governor, and Bill was a strong and effective and committed environmentalist. And he wasn't alone there. In the early days of the '70s when the federal legislation was being passed that we still have depended on all these years, clean air, clean water, et cetera, all those bills were supported by Republicans in Washington as well as in Lansing and in the various states.

Laura Berman:

Looking back on decades of working in environmental policy, do you have any explanation for why there was this divergence at some point where the Republicans stopped, where it completely changed and flipped?

Senator Pollack:

I think it goes back a long time. If you read Dave Dempsey's biography of Bill Milliken, back in the '50s and then the '60s and then the '70s, there was a fight in the two branches of the Republican Party. In fact, I think if you go back to Abraham Lincoln, there's always been two strains in the Republican parties. And one is what I say is more progressive and one is something different.

Laura Berman:

Teddy Roosevelt was a big conservationist.

Senator Pollack:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yes. So you had that strain, you had the other strains. In the Democratic Party, if you want to do a little history too, Michigan. No, excuse me. The Democrats had the Dixiecrats, the South. And so the parties were not all of one thinking. And the Republicans, in my political lifetime, have gone from a lot of Bill Milliken to a lot of Donald Trump. But I saw the beginnings of that, or at least I saw that operating. There were conservatives then, and over time they primaried out the other elements of the Republican Party or they outlived them.

Laura Berman:

They grew stronger and the other element grew weaker.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. Yeah.

Laura Berman:

That's right.

Senator Pollack:

But passing legislation was still the point of it all, and I was proud to be able to have done the Polluter Pay work and some other work too, some of which was bipartisan.

Laura Berman:

Anything that comes to mind that you want to mention?

Senator Pollack:

Some of it was as simple as working on school bus safety, and some of it was-

Laura Berman:

Where you could get bipartisan support and pass bills?

Senator Pollack:

We passed a bill to change the BOCA code, which is the plumbing code for buildings. And we got, it was known as potty parity. So we changed the code so that when ... It was imperfect, but when you built a new building, a public building, certainly stadiums and big halls, or you did a substantial rebuild of an old building, there was a ratio, instead of having equal toilets in the urinals and whatever, everybody knew that it takes men ... no, that it takes men less time than women and that the women's lines are way longer, and now in these newer buildings or redone buildings, that's not two to one or three to one, which it should be, but it's-

Laura Berman:

It's better.

Senator Pollack:

It's better. The lines-

Laura Berman:

Potty parity for all.

Senator Pollack:

Yes. The lines are shorter, but a lot of people didn't want to have that, not because they were so hostile to women going to the bathroom, but it cost money. And it was after all, only the women who were waiting in line. So why spend the money on something that's not going to make any money back and hey, it's not those guys who are standing in line.

Laura Berman:

Well, that was a fascinating history lesson. I actually remember that. It was very important. Yes.

Senator Pollack:

I'll give you one more. Well, one day I received a call from my friend, the attorney Jean King that I mentioned, and she said, "Lana, I want you to introduce legislation." I did. And that was to give equal rights in private "clubs."

Laura Berman:

Clubs.

Senator Pollack:

I used the air quotes because the Supreme Court had at that point already determined what is really a private club. You can't have something that's not really private for private purposes and just call it that so that you can be outside the civil rights laws. So country clubs, as I learned, didn't allow women on the golf course their tee times, except on this day or that day. And so it was restricted. Country clubs would have bars-

Laura Berman:

That were men only.

Senator Pollack:

... men only, the 19th hole. If a couple had a membership in a club and the woman died, the man would be the member, vice versa. And the woman couldn't get that. She would no longer be a member of the club. We were able to change that, in this case, with the help of Republican women who played golf. Again, there's some partisanship there, but women, especially there were some stockbrokers and some women who wore a lot of diamonds and played a lot of golf and-

Laura Berman:

Wanted change.

Senator Pollack:

... and wanted change because a lot of business gets done on the golf course and they needed to do that business too if they were going to be successful as stockbrokers or whatever else. And we changed that and I worked hard on that. Got that one.

Laura Berman:

Found those special Republican women who-

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Laura Berman:

Yeah. That's good. So toward the end of your third term, you decided to run for Senate, US Senate, which was a bold move and you worked very hard on that campaign. Can you talk a little bit about what happened?

Senator Pollack:

I will. I will.

Laura Berman:

I know it's still disappointing in some ways.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. Losses are disappointing, but some of them are more important than others. Yes, I decided to run for the Senate in '94. I had been encouraged, in this case, unlike earlier in my campaign when no one encouraged me, but I had been encouraged to run for Senate when there would be an opening. One of the people who were particularly encouraging had worked for me in the congressional race, David Axelrod, who became Obama's, a major political operative for Obama and handled all his communications during Obama's elections and campaigns. And David Axis, people called him, had worked in my congressional campaign. He was one of the, "Oh, Lana, you'd be a perfect ... You just go ahead and, when there's an opening, when there's a shot."

All right. So here was the shot. In about 1992, there was the great scandal with the S&L, the savings and loans.

Laura Berman:

The Keating Five and all that.

Senator Pollack:

The Keating Five. Yeah. The Keating Five were five senators who were recognized as had done something inappropriate with one of their major donors. And one of the people there, they were both Republican and Democrat, one was John McCain, and one was Don Regal, a man who had been a Republican and became a Democrat as senator. He was a good senator. I liked Don Regal, but he was caught in this unfortunate relationship with Mr. Keating, and his numbers plummeted. He lost credibility. And that went on for months and months, and it was clear he could not run again and win. He just couldn't. I went to him and said, "I'm really wanting to run, and I know if I wait till you announce that you're not running, that the guys will have gotten together and picked their favorite."

Laura Berman:

Where did you talk to him? Did you call him? Did you meet him?

Senator Pollack:

I met him in a hotel in Greektown. I went with Barbara Fuller, who had been my campaign manager in earlier campaigns and a friend-

Laura Berman:

You arranged this meeting, and-

Senator Pollack:

Yes. And Don's wife was there. So there was just four of us in this room, and it was a tough ... I mean, it was hard. I liked him and I was doing something that wasn't easy for me, especially because I liked him, but I also felt confident that ... And I said to him, "Don, you're going to drop out because you don't want to run this race and lose it." I said, "By February of election year, '94, you'll be out." I was wrong. He said he was not. I was wrong because he got out in October instead of February. So that left an open seat, and I had already started up-

Laura Berman:

Started a campaign.

Senator Pollack:

I started up my campaign. I was also right about the fact that the guys got together, and then they picked-

Laura Berman:

Bob Carr?

Senator Pollack:

Bob Carr, member of Congress.

Laura Berman:

But when you say the guys, who are we talking about? What was this mysterious group of people?

Senator Pollack:

You're asking the question of a good reporter. Truly, that's the kind of thing. I know who I think. I know some were active, some were less active. For one thing, Ed McNamara was very important. And Bob Carr, Ed McNamara, who was the chief-

Laura Berman:

Wayne County Executive?

Senator Pollack:

Wayne County Administrator or Executive, yes. Bob Carr had been on the Appropriations Committee for transportation and had, frankly, made what became the McNamara Terminal at the airport possible. And he'd also been very helpful in bringing money to Michigan to roads. He'd done good things for Michigan. So McNamara was determined to get him.

Later on, probably John Dingell, because I know that during the campaign, primary campaign where you might have expected certain people to be neutral until the primary was over, John Dingell moved to have his congressional district organization endorse Bob Carr. That was one of our prouder moments. We fought back, did some organizing, and John couldn't control his district organization. They stayed neutral in that campaign.

I would probably say, on the record, I'd say that I think, that I don't know, the mayor of Detroit. Carl Levin I felt was not very enthusiastic about my race, but the story that I would kind of, unfortunately, put a nasty, grungy little bow around this package is that our campaign got started. I wanted a top-notch staff because they would know the best how to run a statewide campaign. I hadn't. My campaign people hadn't. So we hired a team that had just run successful campaigns for Barbara Boxer and for another senator from Washington. So they were in the top tier of national consultants. We hired for our pollster, Sam Greenberg, who-

Laura Berman:

Cecilia Lake, wasn't it, too?

Senator Pollack:

With Cecilia Lake.

Laura Berman:

Yeah.

Senator Pollack:

And he had just done Clinton's. So I had a national team, and the last national person I'd had I hired for the communications was the man who had been encouraging me, encouraging me to do this, David Axelrod. And the first meeting that we had bringing everybody to Ann Arbor to plan the campaign, we had the first meeting when we drew all, I call them the geniuses, which means they had this great reputation. They were smart. They did know a lot and they cost us a lot too. So we'd have to raise a lot of money to do this. We were to meet in a room that I'd rented in the League at Michigan on campus on a Saturday and have an all-day meeting. And Friday night I got a call from Barbara, my campaign manager, and she said, "Ax is out."

I said, "What do you mean Ax is out?"

"He's dropped out. He won't work for you. He won't work for us. He says if he works for you, he'll never work in Michigan again."

Now I was the one had introduced him to Dennis Archer and-

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:33:04]

Senator Pollack:

-Introduced him to Dennis Archer and a lot of people because I had hired him when he was very new, just coming out of being a reporter and columnist for the Chicago Tribune.

Laura Berman:

Have you ever had a chance to ask him about that since then?

Senator Pollack:

Well, I called him up that night because my campaign manager was telling me this and I said, "I can't believe this." And I called and he said the same, "I'm sure you understand, Lana. I'll never work again in Michigan if I take this campaign." Now that says a lot. They were not only for Bob Carr, they were against me and they were doing whatever they had to keep the talent or the credibility that I had in that race.

There's another story that is true is that before I got into this race, I was in contact with Ellen Malcolm, who was the founder of Emily's List. I knew Ellen from my congressional race and Ellen had encouraged me to look for other opportunities. She's a very careful, pragmatic person who doesn't go off the deep end even if she likes you a lot. Before I got in, I called her and said, "Ellen, I can do a lot, I can raise money, but I can't do it on a national level that it will take to race this race. I need to know that you will and Emily's List will support me." And she said, "Well, let's poll," and we did and we discussed the results of the poll, which didn't make it look easy but made it look possible. And she said, "I'm in," but she wasn't. She felt the pressure of this, as you said, who were these people?

Laura Berman:

There was some group that was working against you. Yeah.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. Well, for one reason, Don-

Laura Berman:

But she was supposed to be the champion of ... I mean that was a ...

Senator Pollack:

Yeah, and afterwards ... Yeah, it was a real heartbreak. She did a little for us, but it was like a fig leaf. She did a mailing or two mailings, but it wasn't what Emily's List had the power to do. She just didn't. She waited three weeks, I guess, after the election. And I remember the call. She called me. And she said, "Will you ever forgive me?" I said, through my tears because I was crying, "Ellen, I don't know." And it's of my mind while we're both still alive to give her a call and say, "I don't know that I've forgiven you, but I do appreciate what you did for this country." Because her work, her generosity, her imagination created a very effective force for changing the gender profile in Congress. Emily's List was terrific, they just betrayed me.

Laura Berman:

When you look back at that race, do you wish you had done anything different or?

Senator Pollack:

Yes, in a way. Some point when there was still time to take this opportunity, our long-term U.S. House Representative, Bill Ford, surprisingly retired. I could have won that seat. The person who won it was Lynn Rivers. Lynn called me before she got in and said, "I'm not going to do this if you are." And I thought, without it turning out to be true, I think I can win the Senate seat. I did ... And I turned down the opportunity to run a race in a democratic district without a strong democratic opposition in the primary. I could have done it. I didn't do it.

Laura Berman:

We all have ours.

Senator Pollack:

Hindsight is wonderful. A few years later, that district was redrawn again and put in with John Dingell, although John had never ... Well, let me put it this way. Dingell would have beat me in a primary six years on, I would have had six years in the house. And then because the way the district was drawn, the greater part of it was Dearborn and areas Downriver that John Dingell controlled. I couldn't beat him in his own old district. Hey. And then I had to decide how to find purpose in life without being in politics because I thought, "I'm not going to spend six years hoping to run for the Senate when their opportunity might never arise."

Laura Berman:

So that was onto your next chapter?

Senator Pollack:

That was onto my next chapter, which was publishing Michigan Monthly, a magazine that was done with a partnership that created a great magazine and not a well-suited partnership. After that, when I was

asked, as the magazine was folding by the Ann Arbor News, I was asked, "What are you going to do next, Senator Pollack?", and I said, "I'm going to go home and clean my oven." I didn't know what I would do, but there were other opportunities.

Laura Berman:

After Michigan Monthly, your foray, brief but important foray, into journalism.

Senator Pollack:

Yes, I loved it. I loved it.

Laura Berman:

You became the Executive Director of the Michigan Environmental Council, MEC. And I don't know how that happened, but maybe you could share that with us.

Senator Pollack:

Well, I took a break after the aggravation of being in a partnership that was ... Well, it was aggravating. And after six months, I was ready to reenter the world. What was I going to do that had purpose? I'd done politics, electoral office, which I knew had purpose. I had tried journalism, which I also knew had purpose. There was another area of possibility, and that was the nonprofit world, the advocacy world, and the Michigan Environmental Council, which was an organization that had brought together a half a dozen localized environmental groups that wanted to pool their resources and be able to have a voice in Lansing. They were looking for an executive director.

I knew the Michigan Environmental Council, which we often refer to as MEC, because when I was in the Senate and on committees and hearings, I would hear from representatives of the MEC, and these people knew a lot about the environment, and it was extremely important to the legislators that they listened to these people. So when I heard they were looking for a director, I called my friend and environmentalist extraordinaire, Dave Dempsey. Dave had been Jim Blanchard's environmental advisor.

Laura Berman:

Guru, yeah.

Senator Pollack:

Guru, yes. He'd also worked, interestingly enough, for Bob Carr. So I called Dave and went up and had an interview with Dave and I said, "Dave, don't you want to be this? You're so qualified," he was for this. And he said, "No, I don't want this job, and I don't understand why you would either." I did understand why I wanted it. All right, so it was an eight-year-old organization with a few hundred thousand dollar budget and three other staff and a terrible office. The office was right next door to the [inaudible 01:42:04] building in downtown Lansing above the coffee shop, but the windows and the doors were literally falling out of their frames, and it was on the top floor and there were pigeons that had covered the windows and made the noise and. Oh, man.

Laura Berman:

Cooed all day.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah, and cooed all day, and I took the job. I took the job and moved the office to a brighter, cleaner place and stayed there 12 years. And we grew from an organization, I think, with six or eight or 10 different organizations as members, the Sierra Club, the East Michigan Environmental Action Council, a number of organizations. We grew it, we included public health organizations, we included religious organizations who had environmental concerns from a religious perspective.

I wanted this organization to be the voice of the environment because ... And I wanted them to be at least a little feared, not just, "Oh, aren't they nice?" The organizations, a lot of them that work in Lansing and other state capitals in the capitals that have fine reputations, but some of them are what I call pat on the head, like, "Aren't you nice?" But when it comes down to voiding, if there's any pressure against the vote, it goes against the vote. We managed to do better with MEC. We gained certainly member organizations.

Laura Berman:

Did your legislative experience-

Senator Pollack:

It helped a lot.

Laura Berman:

-Help you work on policy?

Senator Pollack:

It helped a whole lot. The legislative experience and knowing how to work the governor's office and the governor's cabinet ... I had several years at first with John Engler, which were not easy years. We were swimming upstream, but we were swimming. We were getting someplace in terms of size and in terms of voice.

Laura Berman:

Influence.

Senator Pollack:

And influence. And we used the courts. Early in my tenure, Dave Dempsey, who had agreed to stay on as policy director which was a condition I had because at that time I didn't know that much about the environment. I learned a lot, but Dave was invaluable. He comes into my office and he says ... Standing in the doorway, I can see him. He said that DTE, then Detroit Edison was opening up Connors Creek dirty old coal burning power plant in Detroit on the river. And the law said, as Dave explained if I hadn't already known, that when a power plant goes silent, when it's not used temporarily, if you want to bring it back online, you have to bring it online with today's standards. You can't-

Laura Berman:

Just bring it back.

Senator Pollack:

-Bring it back with the standards of 30, 40 years earlier. And I said, "Well, can they do that?" And Dave said, "No, by law they can't, but they're Detroit Edison and they will." I said, "I don't think they will." And

I called a new organization, Environmental Law & Policy Center out of Chicago, and asked their executive director if they would provide us legal representation and fight them, Howard Lerner. And Howard said, "Yeah," and we filed suit. We got lucky on the judge, Feikins, and we won. We beat them, we beat Detroit Edison, and we won for the people who lived there. We won for the air quality and we won for the water quality.

Laura Berman:

You showed your teeth.

Senator Pollack:

We showed our teeth and it felt good. It was a matter of not being afraid, not making the assumption that the big guy is going to win every round. And again, the capacity that the Michigan ... No, excuse me, that Howard Lerner's group that could provide a good attorney, we got a good judge, and we got a good outcome. There were a lot of losses in the 12 years I was with the Michigan Environmental Council, but we added staff, we added credibility. Eventually, we got a Democratic governor, Jennifer Granholm, who provided a much better leadership of the DNR today, partly Eagle.

I did have a one, I don't know if you call it a tiff with Governor-

Laura Berman:

Disagreement.

Senator Pollack:

Well, she was being a little slow in issuing what she had the authority to issue, which was a new standard mercury. We did a lot of work with reducing mercury, which was part of the coal plant too, getting mercury out of the environment. And she was coming up on her second term campaign, and she was still not moving to issue this order that allowed mercury emissions. And I pointed out that there was mercury in nursing mothers' breast milk, there had just been a big report on that. And that if in a certain period of time we didn't have a protective order on mercury, that there would be a number of nursing mothers picketing the governor's mansion, and we got the order.

Laura Berman:

Good work.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. I mean ... And that was probably helpful to Granholm because you know what? Even a legislator or a governor with good intentions, it's helpful to have pressure, and that's what MEC became, it became a pressure point. It also became a very strong source of information. Just as I had listened as a senator to these few people who could testify, we had more expertise, more people, and we were there for the people who were already inclined to vote for the environmental protections we needed, and we were there to be heard by those who did not.

Laura Berman:

Did you write legislation or was it more a matter of ...

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. Well, officially, everything is written by the people who are hired to the legislative service bureau, the people who write it. But we had enough expertise, even I became pretty expert ... I've learned a lot, frankly, doing the legislation that led up to the Polluter Pay bill. Dempsey, James Clift, these people knew a lot. We also worked a lot on land use because of Michigan was losing open space at a rate much faster than other states. Jennifer Granholm, the governor there appointed a commission that we served on, and again, provided expertise with a number of interest groups, and I though that report eventually led to some legislation, some better practices in land use. So it was public health, land use, and we got into climate as it became a greater awareness of-

Laura Berman:

As a journalist, I became aware of MEC, which I really didn't know anything about before. So we had definitely more outreach and impact, I would say.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. Our funding came from very important foundations, the Mott Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the Americana Foundation, but it also came from individuals. We worked hard. Our budget grew from like 300,000 to two million. We had some really good people who were on our side and we had some good people who worked for us.

Laura Berman:

Did some good word.

Senator Pollack:

Yeah. I'll just say this, that from time to time when I was in that 12-year period with the Michigan Environmental Council, I'd be sitting in a meeting and I'd think, "Am I on the wrong side of this? I'm not on the lawmaking side, I'm on the law advocating side, and am I missing something?" And I realized that as time went on, my chances to get back into electoral politics were becoming vanishingly small. But I also realized that there's more than one way to make a difference in this world, even within the political world, because the political world is made up of people well beyond just those who serve in office.

Laura Berman:

Then after that chapter, you were appointed to the International Joint Commission?

Senator Pollack:

I was, and in this case ...

Laura Berman:

It's a presidential appointment, yeah?

Senator Pollack:

It's a presidential appointment. It's a binational treaty organization. It's half Canadian, it's half U.S., and so it has a dotted line on an org chart to the state Department, but it's not really a part of that, though sometimes the State Department acted like it was. But we weren't to take orders, to be an independent binational organization who had responsibilities for protecting the waters along not just the Great Lakes, but from boundary to boundary, Pacific to Atlantic and including the Yukon. I had an interesting trip and

learned some things about the Arctic that I didn't otherwise know. And there's more than 300 different bodies of water. I certainly learned a great deal of Canada in this.

And we did some valuable things. We were able to make regulations on the dam, the Moses-Saunders Dam at the head of the St. Lawrence Seaway that has a huge impact on the environment. And there was this particularly-

Laura Berman:

So could you make independent rulings or would you ... How did that-

Senator Pollack:

Excuse me, I wrinkled up my face when you said that and rubbed my brow because that was often ... Some authorities would say one thing, some authorities would say the other thing, were we really a part of the State Department? I felt that the treaty was absolutely clear. Our power was limited, but what was there was there. That was not always the prevailing ... And the Canadians were very close to their government. We agreed on many things, but when we didn't agree, it was tough going, I want to tell you, with those people. I was working with conservatives the whole time. I didn't get to work with a liberal prime minister or his appointee. So I was doing conservatives.

But what we could do in certain instances is control the waters that flow over a dam, and I learned that's hugely important. So in the West, for instance, there's droughts, there's flood years, and to know in advance how much water to hold back or when to let it go, and when there is a drought, the people downstream will always say, "You're holding too much water upstream." When there are floods, which I witnessed and realized the power and the horror of them, people downstream would say, "You're not holding enough water upstream." I learned a whole lot about things that I never would have known, including Western waters. They don't have as much as we do here in the Great Lakes, you might note.

But what we were able to do with a lot of work and a lot of public input, I mean people may not know that the IJC, the International Joint Commission, most people will not have heard of it, but believe me, those who know, know, and they get in your face, they're there. It's not unlike politics when you're under a lot of pressure to go in two different directions from two different groups of people. But we were able to, with Obama's support in this case, I went to the White House and his chief of the Domestic Policy Council, Cecilia Munoz, who's a University of Michigan graduate, very high level in the White House, I said, "We're trying to bring back to life 64,000 acres of wetlands that have been destroyed because the dam is poorly managed." And I said, "It will be the second-largest wetlands restoration after the Everglades."

And she agreed this was right down Obama's policy values agenda, although he didn't know it was on the agenda then, and they were very, very helpful. So on the one hand ... Because the interest groups against it were the shipping industry and the ... It was mainly the shipping industry and various interests. So yeah, there was a lot of need to understand and have contact within our own government. We had a meeting with 14 different organizations, parts of the federal government, everybody from the military to treasury, to transportation, and eventually got that kind of support within this government so we were not held back by this government. It was a long, complex, highly political story that ended quite well.

Laura Berman:

And is there a wetlands today?

Senator Pollack:

There are wetlands. People are still complaining who don't want it, but the consequence of that is just beginning to be felt because things don't get restored in a season. They get restored in a decade or decades. But yeah, we made-

Laura Berman:

You felt you had some impact there.

Senator Pollack:

I felt it was really good.

Laura Berman:

Good. I wanted to ask you about I think you loved being a senator-

Senator Pollack:

I did.

Laura Berman:

-And you loved your political career, and I've heard you use those words a few times. And I wonder what was the particular joy and fulfillment that you got from that? What was it?

Senator Pollack:

It mattered. It matters who gets elected. I mean it's not that one person can change the world forever into the form that that individual wants to see, but elected positions, even if you're in the minority, you have a platform. You can say and do and lead and you can inspire younger people.

I like not just passing the legislation, but I felt and do feel that people who hold these positions, they may not be as important as some of them think they are, but they are role models and they do influence and they can change the public debate. They can shift community values if they work at it and build support and know the skills that are necessary to be a good politician, which I don't consider a dirty word, although there are plenty of people now who ... The ones who disappoint me most, and we're having this conversation in 2026 with Donald Trump as President and a total do nothing Congress that's run by Republicans, I think that's just shameful to do nothing, shameful. And I love doing something and I loved having an opportunity to do it from the platform of a state senator.

Laura Berman:

Fantastic. Thank you so much.

Senator Pollack:

You're welcome so much.

Laura Berman:

This was a wonderful opportunity to hear about your remarkable career.

Senator Pollack:

Well, I feel I'm a very fortunate woman. I really do. Thanks.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [02:02:10]