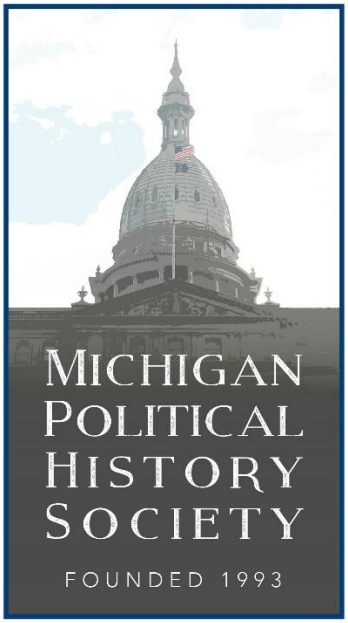
Richard “Rick” Wiener

Interviewed by Larry Lee

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Larry Lee:

We're talking today with Rick Wiener. He's got a long, deep and wide history in the state of Michigan that touched almost every significant political figure in the Democratic Party, certainly. Among them were Carl Levin, the long-term senator of the state of Michigan, Governor Granholm, the first woman who became governor as chief of staff and leader of the Democratic Party of Michigan. In fact, we're here at the Democratic Party Headquarters in Lansing to talk to Rick.

Rick, it's a pleasure to talk to you.

Rick Wiener:

Well, thank you, Larry.

Larry Lee:

Well, let's go back. Now, let's go back to Detroit where you were born. Talk about that and how political was your upbringing?

Rick Wiener:

It wasn't. I wasn't brought up in a political household. My parents voted and they voted only in general elections. Primaries were for the politicians and they said that to me. So I wasn't involved and neither was anybody in my neighborhood. When I went to high school-

Larry Lee:

Mumford High School.

Rick Wiener:

I went to Detroit Mumford in the early '60s and it was a wonderful place to get an education, a high school education, gave me a very good grounding. One of the guys in my junior gym class, a guy who I was close to was a guy named Sam Smargen. Name should mean nothing except one day when we were in gym class, after gym class, he came up to me and said, "I want you to come to a teen Democrats meeting." He knew that I was interested in politics, but not an activist. And I said, "Sam, why would I want to do that?" I said, "I don't drive." He said, "We'll get you a ride." I said, "Give me one good reason." And he looked at me and he said, "There are going to be a lot of cute girls at this meeting."

Larry Lee:

Such as how a career starts.

Rick Wiener:

I learned something interesting about politics and political activism that day, that it's not always about issues. It is about having fun as well within the process. I went to the meeting, the speaker was interesting. Later I went to work for him at the state capitol in 1971, a guy named Jack Faxon, who became a state senator. And I stayed active, met some people who were more active, more wired in, so

to speak, than I was and learned from them. And it started with one person approaching me, as it does for so many people who get active. It's a question of somebody approaching you.

Larry Lee:

Right, and opening a door. So what do you think he saw in you that he knew you were interested in politics if it wasn't part of your home conversations? You didn't sit around the TV and talk about what was happening around the country. That was a pretty active time.

Rick Wiener:

We did not talk much about politics. I mean, the most direct conversation I ever had, and it was in two parts. When I was in the fifth grade, we did a mock election. I was at Emerson Elementary. It was a school that consisted of myself and two other Jewish kids and many Protestants, most of the Catholics in the area went to St. Scholastica, a parochial school. And I asked my parents, "Who are we voting for?" This is 1956. "You're voting for Stevenson." "Why are you voting for Stevenson?" "Because we're Democrats." "Why are you Democrats?" "Because we're Jews." And the vote at Emerson Elementary was about 270:4 for Eisenhower. I sat there thinking, "Where is that fourth Jewish kid?" Because I couldn't figure out... I knew where two of them were, but it was...

Fast-forward to the ninth grade. I am at Mumford High. It is 85% Jewish at the time. And I run into somebody there. I know he's Jewish. He says he's a Republican. I go home and I ask my mom and dad, "How could this be?" They said to me, "He can't really be Jewish and be a Republican," be a Democrat, excuse me, you would have to be a Democrat if you were really Jewish. That was kind of the extent of the conversation at home. One of the things I do remember as a kid, and I've often wondered to this day how much it shaped me, was one of my things that my parents basically made me do. I had to have been, what, six years old, is to stay up and watch the night Edward R. Murrow took down McCarthy.

Larry Lee:

Wow.

Rick Wiener:

And I wonder to this day how much it shaped my thinking because we didn't talk about it afterwards.

Larry Lee:

You did not.

Rick Wiener:

We did not.

Larry Lee:

You didn't ask questions.

Rick Wiener:

I didn't ask questions. I was glad to be able to stay up and watch television, but did it have any impact in my thinking? I have no clue, but it's a vignette that I recall to this day.

Larry Lee:

Do you recall the Nixon-Kennedy debate?

Rick Wiener:

I did. I did watch the Nixon-Kennedy debate. I remember thinking as many people thought, including Theodore White, that Kennedy wound up looking confident, Presidential, fresh, and that Nixon looked haggard. I wasn't going to support Nixon anyway. I was 13 years old in that election, but I do remember that I liked Kennedy. He had an impact, I think, of people who weren't yet eligible to vote and motivated them. He was a very motivational speaker, let's face it. He was an inspirational guy, and he was, relatively speaking, young and looked young.

Larry Lee:

As relatable as it can get to somebody like you.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. And then later in high school, what kind of effect were you seeing from the desegregation of schools in Detroit, that whole movement?

Rick Wiener:

I was kind of at the front end of that. When I say the front end is I'm a pre-busing era child, although I did go out of my catchment area in a-

Larry Lee:

What's that?

Rick Wiener:

A school catchment area, which school are you going to, okay. I was supposed to go to Redford. I had Redford High School. I had an opportunity to go to Detroit Mumford in something called Science and Arts Program, along with... I could have gone to CAS or I could have gone, if I were on the East Side, to Denby, each of those... And it kind of was a nascent magnet school thing. You called it Magnet schools in those days. Mumford High at the time, because of some boundary movement, was probably 20% African-American in population. The neighborhood I grew up in, we did not have an African-American student. I didn't see one K through 8. And to put that-

Larry Lee:

And that's Northwest Detroit?

Rick Wiener:

... to put that in some perspective, I lived four miles inside the Detroit city limits, the western city limits, and two miles, mile and a half south of the northern city limits. When we first moved to that area in 1948, my parents, and of course I was along for the ride-

Larry Lee:

You were one.

Rick Wiener:

... I mean, it was farmland. I mean, there was a working farm right across the street. We're talking inside the city limits. So it was a much different city, a much different time. The efforts to desegregate the schools were just beginning. It was pre-busing. It was before the 1967 civil disturbance, obviously. A lot changed and a lot changed in the '60s.

Larry Lee:

A lot.

Rick Wiener:

And the change was rapid. The change was rapid.

Larry Lee:

Then you went to Wayne State.

Rick Wiener:

I went to Wayne.

Larry Lee:

And a committed Democrat, you became part of the young Democrats there.

Rick Wiener:

I actually became a vice president of the Wayne State Democrats. And my platform, this was in 1966, was that I was going to get Bobby Kennedy to campus. It was complete baloney, but it turned out that Kennedy was coming to Detroit and his car route went straight down Warren on a Saturday. We flooded the areas with leaflets. We brought people out. We stopped traffic. This was something you could do in the '60s. Secret Service would have gone nuts.

Larry Lee:

Well, they weren’t doing open cars yet.

Rick Wiener:

We stopped the car and said, "Here's Bobby Kennedy on the Wayne campus. Let's welcome him." And he had to get out of the car, got Mennen Williams up on the car. And long story short, he "got to the Wayne campus." I got elected.

Larry Lee:

There you go. That's the highlight of your young Democrat career.

Rick Wiener:

Let's put it this way. If it's not of any interest to your listeners, it surely was of interest to me.

Larry Lee:

And what were you studying at Wayne State?

Rick Wiener:

I was a political science major ultimately. I started out in the pre-pharmacy program, organic chemistry and I did not get along as well as was necessary to be a pharmacist. And in retrospect, probably not being a pharmacist was a good move in my life. And so I was a political science major because it was a class that was open when I had to drop or dropped organic chemistry, and I stayed with it. I liked it. I found the study of political science in those days was more theoretical as contrasted to being practical, but still liked it.

Larry Lee:

Where did you think that would take you?

Rick Wiener:

I had no idea.

Larry Lee:

At that point?

Rick Wiener:

I expected to teach school.

Larry Lee:

Which you did.

Rick Wiener:

I taught school for three years. I taught a year in Inkster at the high school. I taught two years at Clintondale High School in Clinton Township. I left teaching and got a job for a guy I had met at the first meeting I went to in the Northwest Detroit teen Democrats who had run for state rep in '64 and I had helped him and run for state senate in '70 and he had won. That was the first year that professional non-clerical staff were added to the Senate payroll and I was hired by Senator Faxon.

Larry Lee:

By Senator Faxon, who had started as the youngest member of the Constitutional Convention, and the Convention allowed the legislature to be full time, which then allowed staff to be added to the offices.

Rick Wiener:

Right.

Larry Lee:

So there you were.

Rick Wiener:

There I was. I was the beneficiary of, and in life, quite frankly, I have been the beneficiary of a lot of fortuitous circumstances of which that was one.

Larry Lee:

Certainly. I mean, before that, you did also go to Eastern Michigan for a master's and you went to-

Rick Wiener:

No, I didn't. I went to Eastern later on in life.

Larry Lee:

Oh, really? Okay.

Rick Wiener:

I went to Eastern in my sixties. I was 64 when I enrolled and both my wife and I decided we're getting near retirement. What do we want to do when we grow up? She went back to school to pursue a degree in sports administration.

Larry Lee:

Oh my gosh.

Rick Wiener:

I went back because I had always had a passion for historic preservation. I went back to pursue a master's degree in historic preservation and finished everything except the paper. I got sick once, didn't finish the coursework, and then went back, got sick again, and I felt I was getting a message that 65 year olds should not be pushing themselves necessarily, but I loved the experience.

I mean, Larry, let me tell you something. I mean, if I had one advice, going back to school when there's nothing riding on the outcome, it is a blast and it was for me too.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. And you're one of a few students, non-traditional students like that back at Eastern Michigan, I would think.

Rick Wiener:

I was... The only other one in the program that would come close, there was a 50-year-old woman who was tired of being a doctor. She was an MD, and she went back. She was in class with me. I think she finished.

Larry Lee:

Then you also, before that, going back again, you were at the Detroit College of Law and got a degree.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. I had-

Larry Lee:

Well, at night school, right?

Rick Wiener:

I had been in the master's program at Wayne. I got, frankly, tired of theoretical courses dealing with politics. I'd been dealing with practical politics for a while, but teaching was getting to be a crowded field. Strangely enough, there was an abundance of teachers initially, in part because it was a draft deferment for males in that era. And then all of a sudden, there was an imbalance of supply and demand, and I wanted something that wasn't dependent as a career on the slings and arrows of political fortune. I knew that someday something was going to go bad in politics, or at least I had that fear, turned out to be quite justifiable. So I went to law school. I didn't frankly think I was bright enough to go to law school, but I was also tired of lawyers who were political, talking down to me because I wasn't a lawyer and that was part of my perverse motivation.

Larry Lee:

Did you think you would actually hang a shingle at some point or was it use the law another way?

Rick Wiener:

I didn't have a clue where this was going. Like many things in my life, I hadn't thought out the next step. I thought out a step, I didn't know where it was going. The first person who interviewed me for a job out of law school was Tom Downs.

Larry Lee:

Legendary election lawyer in the state of Michigan.

Rick Wiener:

Legendary election lawyer, and I'm sure I would have been well served, except I would have had to take a pay cut, at least initially and I just bought a house, this and that.

Larry Lee:

You were married?

Rick Wiener:

When I finished law school, I was in my first marriage, yes. I got married in law school and then, I got remarried, as you know, in 1984 and have been wonderfully married ever since with Raj.

Larry Lee:

Yes, your business partner and wonderful woman.

Rick Wiener:

And my life partner.

Larry Lee:

For a long time. And then, back as you touched on it, you come to Lansing and worked for Jack Faxon, and so your career starts here in this town.

Rick Wiener:

Well, I worked for Senator Faxon for a little over two years. I wanted to get some experience on the House side and for committee work, for more substantive legislative, less constituent work. Bill Broadhead, who had a state rep district included in Senator Faxon's district, approached me because we had grown quite close.

Larry Lee:

Because you had worked for him?

Rick Wiener:

He asked me to work for him, and so I did. A year later, Martha Griffiths announced that she was retiring from Congress. Bill ran, won a primary, very improbably, by a whopping 256 votes out of 73,000 more or less cast. I went to work for Bill at that point in time in his district office. I was still going to law school and I was going to the Detroit College of Law and all of a sudden, I went from having a ride that was 180-mile roundtrip every day to a ride that was 9 miles each way to law school. I couldn't believe it, I had all this time on my hands all of a sudden. So, those were good years.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. So you served in that position how long?

Rick Wiener:

A total of three years.

Larry Lee:

Wow.

Rick Wiener:

I took a leave of absence in '76 for the general election to help Don Riegle.

Larry Lee:

That's a great story.

Rick Wiener:

I was his field director, and it was a one-of-a-kind campaign. Don, of course, Don won, and we had remained in touch pretty regularly until he passed away earlier in 2026.

Larry Lee:

I mean, that sounds like a pretty big break for you right there, just the fact that you were able to run a campaign for a guy whose election was not exactly in the bag, not in that time, and had survived a primary pretty easily.

Rick Wiener:

I'm not sure why he asked me, to be honest with you, and he had asked me twice. He had originally asked me the first time, and I'd begged off, in part because I knew I was going to be studying for the bar exam that summer, and I didn't figure that was a wise thing to do. I was going to take the bar exam because I knew I had to take it then and I had to take it once, and I had to get it done.

Larry Lee:

Had to get it right. So you missed the primary.

Rick Wiener:

And he won the primary, came back and asked me. My predecessor, a guy named John Eid, John left as his field director, as Don Riegle's, to go run the Carter campaign in Missouri, which Missouri went for Carter that year. So John, obviously, did an exemplary job in a very, very tough state. So I didn't expect the position to roll around, wasn't looking to do anything except go back to Bill, but I did that.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. Morley Winograd, the Chair of the Democratic Party, said he did recommend you to Don that he hire you. So he must have seen something in you.

Rick Wiener:

He recommended me and leaned all over me to do it and laid out compelling reasons, felt that the campaign needed some additional organizational oomph that... I mean, Don was still sort of an outsider. I mean, he had only been, remember he had changed parties and had only been a Democrat-

Larry Lee:

For like three years.

Rick Wiener:

... three years. And it was felt that I had some skills that I... And I was getting a reputation for being a pretty good political organizer, and I'm proud of that.

Larry Lee:

So what kind of things did you think you made a difference in doing in that election?

Rick Wiener:

Elections were increasingly becoming turnout, and turning out the vote was important, but there was a greater need for identifying that vote upfront. We didn't have, obviously, the sophisticated computerization data, et cetera. I mean, we were at the infancy of being able to identify, in fact, we were pre-infancy to being able to identify voter tendencies by things other than how you voted or by demographic aspects. And the things which we take for very much granted today in politics that you can figure out what voter tendency is because of where one lives, well, you could do that then, what magazines they subscribe to, what this, what that, this was in its infancy-

Larry Lee:

It was just scratching.

Rick Wiener:

... and we were just scratching the surface on on stuff like that. And so I was able to play a critical role in identifying and turning out voters who would vote for Don Riegle or successive candidates or Democrats generally. And that was seen as my strength, my initial strength. There were, obviously, strategic overlays to that as well and occasionally, I had a good idea or two.

Larry Lee:

Or two, which did what?

Rick Wiener:

Shaped overall strategy in the campaigns, not so much in Don Riegle's because I was more a traditional field director in that. As time goes on, I got to be seen more as adding a strategic and a tactical overlay, and I don't mean to equate or confuse the two. Sometimes tactics are important, sometimes strategy is important, sometimes just guessing right. You can look like a genius sometime when it's nothing more than a guess.

Larry Lee:

Well, it really helps. But you were running in a seat that was being left open by the retiring Jim Hart, legendary national figure, and Phil Hart, I'm sorry. And how'd you escape from that shadow as a candidate trying to fill that seat?

Rick Wiener:

You have to state... I mean, I'll answer that in a couple of parts. One, Don Riegle was everywhere, okay? I mean, he was the Energizer bunny before those commercials were invented, and he just was. And it wasn't just that he was physically in a lot of place. He conveyed an energy by his speaking style, by everything, his gestures. He had a way of speaking at the podium. I've never quite seen it since, where he would gesture first with one arm and then, he would gesture with both arms, and it almost felt like he was pulling you into a conversation with him, even though there could be 3,000 people in...

Rick Wiener:

... even though there could be 3000 people in the room. And so in one sense, it was stylistically. He was different stylistically. He definitely was not quiet, soft-spoken in the same way that Senator Hart was. He was passionate, not just about issues as Senator Hart of course was, but stylistically he was passionate. And I think through the course of the campaign, he was able to stake out his own ground in part because of his stylistic difference.

Larry Lee:

Well, he was certainly vocal and passionate in the debate against Marvin Esch, the Republican candidate. That seemed to be a big moment in the campaign. Talk about that.

Rick Wiener:

Well, the debate is a distant memory, Larry. I remember that he fared very, very well in the debate. And I remember that the energy that he conveyed showed up in the final days of the campaign very tellingly

because one of the things I remember as the campaign went on, television was looking for live events. We gave them lots of red meat with lots of enthusiastic cheering, gleeful, happy, enthusiastic audiences. Congressman Esch, I remember one scene very vividly where he showed up at a mall, he was looking for hands to shake and the TVs captured that and then juxtaposed the two. It was very telling. And it was in an era where coverage like that probably meant more than it does today, undoubtedly meant more than it does today.

Larry Lee:

Did he want you to come to Washington with him?

Rick Wiener:

Strangely enough, we never discussed it. I made it very clear at the end of the, actually even before the campaign that I was going back to Bill at the end of the campaign and I didn't want to be asked. I had assumed quite frankly that Bill Broadhead might run for higher office as well. And Bill and I were very-

Larry Lee:

And he did.

Rick Wiener:

Not in '78. He ran many years-

Larry Lee:

Later, yeah.

Rick Wiener:

... later in '94 and by then the people... He had left Congress in '82. People forget a lot of stuff. In 12 years you're out of office.

Larry Lee:

They do.

Rick Wiener:

And it was true with Bill Broadhead and frankly it was true with Jim Blanchard as well.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. But you did keep in touch with Don Riegle and he only died this year, but you kept in touch.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah, I did keep in touch and-

Larry Lee:

So it was a big part of your life.

Rick Wiener:

It was. He was a wonderful, wonderful man. He was a genuine, passionate fighter for causes. He was inspirational to many people. I know of people who knew him from that era, the '70s, who talked to me about how he inspired them to get more involved, to fight for things they believed in. And he was a motivator.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. And so along the way in this part, you keep collecting connections with all kinds of people in the party. Mike Duggan, who ran for governor this year, but had done a lot of things in Wayne County. Jim Blanchard, you'd worked with Conrad Mallett, who became a Supreme Court justice, all those things. But then you wind up with Carl Levin.

Rick Wiener:

When Bill Broadhead was clear that he wasn't going to run for the Senate, I had so much respect for Carl Levin. I was willing to quit my job.

Larry Lee:

And he was still on the Detroit City Council.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah, he was still on the city council. I wanted to see him in the United States Senate.

Larry Lee:

Really?

Rick Wiener:

I just did. And he asked me, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to be involved in your campaign and I'm willing to quit my job over it, to do it."

Larry Lee:

Yeah. What did you see that was so remarkable in this guy?

Rick Wiener:

I just saw that this was a guy who was a passionate fighter, that he was absolutely straight arrow, that he was totally trustworthy. And the notion of electing a Jewish senator, I must admit, was on my front lobe, definitely on my frontal lobe. And of course he decided to run. It took him a lengthy, somewhat lengthy decision-making process. Carl was a very deliberative person. If nothing else, he was deliberative. And then of course -

Larry Lee:

This is 1978. Tell me-

Rick Wiener:

This is 1977 and '78 ultimately by the time.

Larry Lee:

Yeah, but it's the election.

Rick Wiener:

And of course in that Senator Griffin got out of the race and then got back into the race. So Carl was then running against the number two person in the United States Senate on the Republican side. This was no slouch we were taking on. And I used to laugh and I say, "We must not have been, or I must not have been very smart because I was too dumb to realize that we weren't supposed to win the election." And that's kind of the way it worked out. He ran an incredible grassroots campaign. He took his city council race, which he did dear neighbor letters everywhere in the city and said, "Let's do this everywhere in the state."

And somebody from the Griffin campaign later on, I wound up, some of them are still friends, some of them deceased now. One of them, a former client as it turned out when I went into private practice later. But it was lamenting. He said, "We couldn't even figure out how to get a mailing out and you were putting out stuff geared to the precinct in every state." And yeah, we did. And did it matter? I think it probably did because he won. And part of it was, we had some good fortune in the election. We hit on themes that people could relate to and we did them simply.

Larry Lee:

And Griffin's indecision about running again also played a factor in this. That helped you out a little bit.

Rick Wiener:

And in the process of his indecision, he missed a lot of roll calls. A guy named Jim Vollman, who you may recall, Jim came up with this idea, let's do a little five and a half by eight and a half, a little leaflet with a picture of a time clock on it. Because it turned out that Bob Griffin had missed 216 roll call votes out of 648.

Larry Lee:

Oh, my gosh.

Rick Wiener:

Didn't punch [inaudible 00:37:50] and the way we found it, possibly the most bizarre story in my political life, we had a guy who was a junior field staffer named... I'll let him remain nameless.

Larry Lee:

Okay.

Rick Wiener:

Okay. And he calls me up, he goes to a payphone. He's making like $30 a week. I mean, as a junior staffer, even in those days, $30 a week wasn't much. And he said, "Brooks Patterson," who's running against Bob Griffin in the primary, "Is out in front of," I think it was the Fisher Building. And he says, "I will give $216 to the guy who can identify what's the importance of the number 216 to Bob Griffin." And I said, "Yeah, and?" He said, "And what is it?" He said, "Yeah, and?" And he laughed and he said, "I'll give $216 of the $648 that he's giving out to the campaign. I'll give a third of it to the campaign."

Larry Lee:

Wow.

Rick Wiener:

Some of us hadn't been paid in several weeks. I said, "Why don't you try this?" We didn't know the answer. He said, "Try missed roll calls." Bingo and he was right. It became the one thing that stuck.

Larry Lee:

Wow.

Rick Wiener:

It wasn't done by our opposition research.

Larry Lee:

It was.

Rick Wiener:

It was Brooks Patterson, ironically.

Larry Lee:

Brooks, a Republican who was about as devastating a wit as you can imagine in Michigan politics.

Rick Wiener:

Yep. He had a way of getting attention-

Larry Lee:

He did.

Rick Wiener:

... that was uncanny. But that's how that came about. It became the issue as contrast... We actually wanted to talk about other things in the general. Very seldom got a chance.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. But he won and then won and won and won.

Rick Wiener:

He won and he survived a tough '84 election. And frankly, that was the only election that was really competitive for him after that.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. But you stayed on and worked for him as the Michigan director of his Senate office.

Rick Wiener:

I was his Michigan director. We set up either six, I think it was seven offices around the state. They were mostly constituent service outreach offices, did a lot of constituent relations and a lot of grants work. Grants were not as abundant in those days because the pots of money have gone up exponentially, but they were just as appreciated. And we did a lot of that. We represented, and the regional offices represented Senator Levin on many places. Don Riegle, it was complimented by the fact Don Riegle had half a dozen district offices and we set ours up basically in places where he wasn't. He was in Flint, logically enough.

Larry Lee:

Right, yeah.

Rick Wiener:

We were in Saginaw. He was in Traverse City. We were in Alpena. He was in the UP Marquette. We were in the UP Escanaba, et cetera, et cetera. I think we had offices in Grand Rapids, both of us, and obviously in Southeast Michigan.

Larry Lee:

And you would go around to each of those places?

Rick Wiener:

I would do the circuit. Yeah.

Larry Lee:

Yeah, yeah. And you left after four years, before his first term was up.

Rick Wiener:

I left after three years and I left-

Larry Lee:

But including the campaign.

Rick Wiener:

Oh yeah. Okay. Yeah. It was a year of the campaign, three years, and they were great years.

Larry Lee:

You talked about it being the best four years of your professional life.

Rick Wiener:

I really don't know how to describe it. It just felt good every day to go to work, but I also knew there were other challenges out there. One of them is it had been a long time in the desert for Michigan Democrats to have a governor. In fact, one of the things we found out when Jim Blanchard was elected in '82 was looking-

Larry Lee:

After 14 years of Governor Milliken.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. And a few years of Romney in there is a lot. It was really hard to find people who were around who had anything relevant to say to us in transition who were Democrats.

Larry Lee:

How do we do this?

Rick Wiener:

Pardon me?

Larry Lee:

How do you do this, Romney?

Rick Wiener:

How do we do this? How do we do this? How do we do that? As helpful as the Millikan people were, and they were in transition, it was hard to find people to talk to that you knew well. I don't want to say that you could trust, but that you could instinctively trust in the same-

Larry Lee:

Did you lean on Attorney General Kelley?

Rick Wiener:

Certainly the attorney general and the secretary of state, but neither of them were governor.

Larry Lee:

They weren't, but they ran offices.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. Yes. The short answer is yes, but the longer answer is there were holes that only the experience of people who had been in the governor's office could fill in a discussion. And with Governor Granholm, obviously the gap wasn't as long when I was there and when I was chief of staff.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. But to fill it in, I mean, you went to the Blanchard campaign as deputy campaign manager.

Rick Wiener:

I was called field director also there, but, yeah, I was a de facto deputy campaign manager.

Larry Lee:

Through the primary and then the general.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. And so that was a contentious primary. There's, again, no sure thing that Congressman Blanchard was going to come out of that.

Rick Wiener:

There were six or seven people in it. There were some strong candidates in it.

Larry Lee:

Well-known names.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. A couple of state senators, strong candidates all the way around.

Larry Lee:

And what do you think made the difference for Jim Blanchard, the auto bailout perhaps?

Rick Wiener:

I think for one thing, Candidate Blanchard was very good to sticking on message. I mean, his theme was jobs at a time when the economy was suffering. He never got off of it. If it was another issue, it's not that it wasn't important to him, it's that it wasn't front lobe for lack of a better word.

Larry Lee:

I can feel hear it now, "Jobs, jobs, jobs."

Rick Wiener:

"Jobs, jobs, jobs." The second time when he ran, "Jobs, jobs, jobs, and more jobs."

Larry Lee:

"And more jobs," right.

Rick Wiener:

And he stayed on message. It was bolstered by the fact, obviously, that he had a very powerful story to tell in the Chrysler rescue. What he did in that, what he caused to happen in that was, in my view, it saved the state.

Larry Lee:

Did a lot, and he did it as a member of Congress with not a lot of leverage actually, but-

Rick Wiener:

He was on the right committee.

Larry Lee:

He was on the right committee.

Rick Wiener:

He was on banking, and that obviously helped, but he had a good message and he never deviated from it.

Larry Lee:

And Richard Headlee was his opponent.

Rick Wiener:

Richard Headlee was his-

Larry Lee:

Who has upset the favored candidate in the Republican primary.

Rick Wiener:

The former lieutenant governor, yeah.

Larry Lee:

Correct, yeah.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. And that was a surprise. Would the election have been tougher? I don't know. People say it would've been tougher. It might not... You're dealing with crystal balls stuff when you say, "This would've been tougher or not tougher." It's be careful what you wish for, you may get it type of thing. I don't know if it would've been tougher or not, but it definitely would've been different.

Larry Lee:

Would've been different. Do you think people were wanting a change from Republican administration, perhaps? We are a divided state after all, even then.

Rick Wiener:

I think people were concerned about jobs.

Larry Lee:

Jobs, back to that.

Rick Wiener:

And I don't think that Dick Headlee's identifier, if you think back to it, was he's the tax cutting job. This was one of the years where cutting taxes was not as powerful a message than create jobs for me and my family and my kids.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. Just to fill in about Headlee, he had been the proponent of a tax limitation amendment to the Constitution, which we still-

Rick Wiener:

'78 Headlee Amendment, yes.

Larry Lee:

Exactly. And so then you did not stay with the Jim Blanchard administration?

Rick Wiener:

Not directly. I mean, I talked with Jim early on. He wanted me to run for state Democratic chair.

Larry Lee:

Which he did.

Rick Wiener:

Which he did. It sounded like fun. And little did I know that within a year, the recalls would start of two Democratic state senators, both successful, but again, it seemed like the right thing to do that it seemed like a logical extension to me. As I shared with you, Larry, I haven't really gone from campaign to campaign thinking about what my next job is going to be. I mean, I really haven't. I'm mindful of a movie I used to watch with my kids called George of the Jungle. I don't know if you ever saw that kids' movie.

Larry Lee:

I never saw that.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. In which George would always... George kind of lucky, I guess. And I kind of feel that that's me is I always felt-

Larry Lee:

Lucky and good.

Rick Wiener:

I always felt that if I did a good job, the next thing would become apparent to me after the campaign, and I've invariably turned out to be right. If I had done it the other way and sat there thinking, "What job do I want?" Boy, you've seen and I've seen a lot of people fall into that mind trap. You probably more than me because you've covered people like that, both in this state and nationally. You get thinking about what job you want next, and all of a sudden you sit there thinking, "Well, first I got to win the bloody election and I got to do a good job." And really, to me, it was always backwards thinking, "Do a good job."

Larry Lee:

Do a good job, yep.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. "Do a good job. Win the election. The story will tell itself." It's the same thing I used to tell incumbent candidates. "What you need to do is do a good job and tell the story about how you did your good job, and you get a 98% chance of getting reelected." And if you stop and think of the people in your life, and if those watching this type, this recording think of the people they know in their life who approached it the other way, it doesn't always work as well.

Larry Lee:

It doesn't, but it goes back to the principle you heard from Senator Levin. Yeah, just doing a great-

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. Carl Levin was all about doing a good job and doing it the right way. Carl believed there was a right and wrong answer to everything, not based on ideology, although he had a political philosophy, but based upon the right answer and the wrong answer based on... And it's the middle of the '78 campaign, and I think it's deregulation of natural gas, or one of these issues is the hot button issue. And we're talking about how to handle and Carl said, "No, we're not going to do this on the basis... There is a right answer to this question." And he made Bob Seltzer, the campaign manager, take one side of the issue and me take the... And we stopped the campaign for a full hour to debate the-

Larry Lee:

Something like that.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. And I can't remember which one of us was on which side of the issue. I do remember sitting there thinking, "I got a lot of other stuff to get done." But that was kind of like the way he thought about things. So it was always great in that regard.

Larry Lee:

When you stepped in as chair of the Democratic Party, you must have though, gosh, another big high in your life. Democrats had won the governor and they held other statewide offices and controlled the Legislature. Something really rare.

Rick Wiener:

It was the hat trick.

Larry Lee:

Exactly.

Rick Wiener:

Although Frank Kelly said at the Democratic State Convention where I was elected, he said, "Rick, enjoy this day. It's only going to go downhill from here."

Larry Lee:

And it did.

Rick Wiener:

Frank had been... We had a couple of recalls. We lost control of the Senate.

Larry Lee:

Which would last 40 years.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. Of course, '84 was a big Republican national year. We barely survived keeping control of the House, kept it by two seats. And Bob Carr barely hung on for Congress, although he did hang on against all odds that year. Those were tough years.

Larry Lee:

Well, and the recalls came out of-

Rick Wiener:

The recalls came out and Governor Blanchard's popularity was dropped. And then of course, 1986 rolled around and he got reelected by big number. Big number.

Larry Lee:

But in that first term, I mean, he walked into a situation with a budget in terrible shape, job losses like crazy, and got an income tax increase that then prompted these recalls of two legislators, something we'd not seen in this state. Did that just come out of left field that that was a strategy on the Republican side?

Rick Wiener:

We had never seen it before.

Larry Lee:

Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

We prepared for it as best we could once it was announced. In hindsight, it's clear to me that they had been better prepared for it. And in discussions I've had with others who are now friends and also now on the other side of the aisle, it was something they had been preparing for, for longer than we had been preparing for a defense.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. And they strategically targeted Senator Mastin and Senator Serotkin.

Rick Wiener:

And Senator McCullough.

Larry Lee:

And Senator McCullough.

Rick Wiener:

Senator McCullough and McCullough was an insufficiency of signatures.

Larry Lee:

Right. Yep. So in the strategy, did you talk about having them resign so they could run in a general election and not just be a one which allows voters who just say no instead of choosing between-

Rick Wiener:

They did not talk about it. You're talking about it was not discussed with them.

Larry Lee:

Right. Like you could have done that legally ahead of a recall election.

Rick Wiener:

Could have.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. Because the recall kind of gives the antis an edge in a way.

Rick Wiener:

We were in uncharted waters.

Larry Lee:

We were, yeah.

Rick Wiener:

And those were tough times for us.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. So leading the party then through all of that for what, six years?

Rick Wiener:

I was chair for six years.

Larry Lee:

And what were the highlights of that?

Rick Wiener:

Well, we did hold the House. The party was in substantial debt when I became chair and we left the party structurally, financially. In terms of technology, we were... Look, state of the art wasn't what state of the art was 35 years later, but we were state of the art technologically. We paid off the building. We had stronger county parties. We had more of a presence with county parties. So some of the traditional structure was maintained.

Larry Lee:

So then after that, you did go into private business?

Rick Wiener:

Well, I did. It was coupled with running for Democratic national chair.

Larry Lee:

Unsuccessfully, as it turned out.

Rick Wiener:

It was unsuccessfully. I ran in 1989. I lost to Ron Brown, a wonderful, wonderful human being who wanted the same thing I wanted. Seemed like the next logical thing in my life again, but it wasn't. And Ron, of course, was tragically killed in the plane crash in 90... I want to say 94.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. Yeah. What'd you take out from that experience?

Rick Wiener:

I had assumed I was done with politics as a vocation. I just decided, all right, I had gone-

Larry Lee:

That's run this course.

Rick Wiener:

... I had gone to law school for a reason. And the reason was because I knew that someday politics might go sour and I didn't know when.

Larry Lee:

Has it been... right.

Rick Wiener:

And it seemed like a logical time to move on. I had remarried. Raj and I were relative newlyweds at that point in time, four or five years. We're now up to 42.

Larry Lee:

Congratulations. Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

Thank you. And I just decided it was the time to build a business. I went into a sole practice and built it over the next 14 years. By the way, as an aside, one of the last things I did as state chair is I had to hire a bunch of field staff for the coordinated campaign in 1988. One of the people I wound up hiring was a young woman recently out of law school, I think on her way to the U.S. District Attorney's office, basically looking to be involved in the campaign for three months. That person was Jennifer Granholm.

Larry Lee:
Jennifer Granholm. Yeah.

Rick Wiener:
And so she was on my payroll, technically.

Larry Lee:
She worked for you?

Rick Wiener:
14 years later, she returned the compliments.

Larry Lee:
Indeed, in a big way.

Rick Wiener:
In a big way. We stayed in touch after that, but that's how we first met.

Larry Lee:
Right. And just before that, just to finish up the business that now has been around for 37 years, I think.

Rick Wiener:
I'll take your word for it.

Larry Lee:
Something like that.

Rick Wiener:
I haven't been around it since 2016.

Larry Lee:
Correct.

Rick Wiener:
I remember I had flunked retirement, as you know, for a couple of times along the way. And I made the vow I wasn't going to flunk retirement a third time. Raj and I were sole owners of the business, and it was like a scene out of Cheers. On June 30th, 2016, at about five o'clock, I looked at Raj and asked her, "Do you remember the last scene in Cheers?" It's when guy was knocking on the door, and Sam Malone, Ted Danson says, "Sorry, we're closed." That was me that day and I never looked back.

Larry Lee:
Never looked back. Yeah. But you lobbied for a variety of causes as part of that organization.

Rick Wiener:

We had some traditional corporate clients and we had a lot, a lot of non-traditional clients and we would Band-Aid groups together. For example, neither the Heart Association, the Lung Association, the Cancer Society could afford a lot of lobbyists. Smoking was a big deal. Raj put together and we lobbied for the Michigan Coalition for Smoking or Health.

Larry Lee:

I know. Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

It was a group we created. We put together enough people who had a little bit of money, but not enough to do full tariff to lobby for the persons with developmental disabilities. We did a lot of groups like that. And then we had some traditional corporate clients, some of whom understood that we were doing other things as well, but as long as we did a good job for them, were comfortable in having us do other things.

Larry Lee:

Right. And so then getting back to Governor Granholm, the attorney general won the governor's race. And one of the first things she did was say, "Rick, I want you to be my chief of staff." You called it chief operating officer.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah, I did. To go back for, I mean, in '98, Dave Katz, who was-

Larry Lee:

Correct. That's what I wanted to get to, how you started this.

Rick Wiener:

I mean, I've always been close to the McNamara people. Dave Katz and Mike Duggan-

Larry Lee:

Wayne County.

Rick Wiener:

... Wayne County, Ed McNamara, Wayne County-

Larry Lee:

Executive and then his chief.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. And of course, Duggan was the deputy and Katz had a variety of hats and titles. He called me up one day. He said, "Let's get Jennifer Granholm elected attorney general. Does it sound like fun to you?" And that's literally how it started. And I said, "Yeah, it sounds like fun. Let's do it."

Larry Lee:

Goes back to high school, and-

Rick Wiener:

It was kind of like that way. He said, "Yeah, we'll raise a little money." I wound up basically being a, I don't want to say a full-time volunteer, but a pretty full-time volunteer on the AGs campaign.

Larry Lee:

Because it wasn't an official title.

Rick Wiener:

I never had an official title-

Larry Lee:

No.

Rick Wiener:

... nor did I have an official title in the governor's campaign, but I basically, at the start of 20, nor did I take a paycheck, said to my law partner, also my wife, "If I spend a lot of time in Detroit in the next year, can you handle stuff?" And she said, "Sure." I stayed in touch with clients and handled clients, but I wasn't-

Larry Lee:

Physically, yeah.

Rick Wiener:

... pounding the marble tiles in the Capitol on a routine basis. And that was pretty much for a whole year. At the end of it, then Governor-Elect Granholm asked me to be her chief of staff, and I initially turned her down.

Larry Lee:

You did?

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. I said, "First off, I could think of 10 people who could do a better job than me." And I started naming them. I won't on this one, but I could think of 10 people that I thought... I said, "What do you see in me that causes you to ask?" And she looked me dead in the eye and she said, "Rick, you have good judgment and I trust it."

Larry Lee:

And?

Rick Wiener:

And I said, "Whoa." I said, "Let me talk to Raj." I went home that night and told Raj and said, "And I'm going to turn it down." And she looked at me and those of you, like you, Larry, who know Raj, know this look. And she looked at me and says, "Honey, honey, I just have one question for you. When you go to meet your maker, are you going to regret having done this? Because if you are, you should do this." Because I give it all the reasons, good logical reasons, young family, this, that, every other thing.

Larry Lee:

And you know it's an all-consuming job.

Rick Wiener:

Well, I found out in the job what I had expected was that there are three things you can do in life. I felt you could only do two of them very well. You had to pick which two. They were work, engage with your family, and sleep. And I wasn't going to mess up my job and I wasn't going to mess up my family. And that means I didn't sleep a lot for three years.

Larry Lee:

For three years, yeah.

Rick Wiener:

And it had some consequences in my... I was pretty exhausted when I left after three years. Could others have approached the job differently? Sure. In retrospect, could I have approached the job differently? No, because that's the way I know how to do things and it's the only way I know how to do things.

Larry Lee:

So there's not a lot of definition out there about a chief of staff and what that duty is, or even chief operating officer that is the job you had. How did you approach what you needed to do for the governor?

Rick Wiener:

Well, first off, I talked to a lot of people in transition. I wanted to know how others handled it. And I should add quickly, one of the people who personally was most helpful, I'm not talking about being helpful to the governor, that's expected, but helpful to me personally in transition with suggestion guidance was John Engler.

Larry Lee:

Really?

Rick Wiener:

Absolutely. And when you stop and think about the circumstances of how one of his close friends was defeated for office, I mean, I give him a lot of thanks and a lot of credit. I mean, it was definitely helpful.

Larry Lee:

How did that come about?

Rick Wiener:

Well, I've known John Engler for, well, since 1971. There's a reason I didn't major in math. I started on the staff. Remember the year he was elected, and while I didn't know him well, let's face it, there was only so many people who've known him what now would be 55 years. That's a long, long time. And so there was a second, all of the election law stuff that happened in terms of legislation got negotiated in his office, usually by myself and him. The presidential primary changes in 1988 being an example. Three, he is an institutionalist.

Larry Lee:

He is, for sure. Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

Absolutely an institutionalist. He was very helpful. And I talked to as many people as I could to figure out how they wanted to structure. And I don't know I would have described it like this at the time, but I decided I wanted kind of a hybrid. I wanted the decisions to flow through the governor. I wanted a cabinet secretary to deal with request reports from the... But I did not want 19 cabinets reporting straight on to me. I wanted to be able to pick and spot. And I wanted, unlike some chiefs of staff, you've had chiefs of staffs who are political, you have chiefs of staff who are not political. I did not want to give up all of the politics and nor did the governor want me to.

So I had kind of a hybrid way of doing this where I didn't involve myself in every cabinet decision. I picked and chose and trusted the cabinet secretary to bring those which were the most significant to me. The one thing, because Mary A. Lannoye, who was then the budget director, specifically asked is, she wanted my direct involvement in the budget negotiations. And so I was probably more involved in budget negotiations than many chiefs. And given the tight-

Larry Lee:

Probably more than you wanted, really.

Rick Wiener:

Well, given the tight financial situation that the state had been in and the economic downturn, just remember, I mean, this was the events leading up to the collapse of America's economy. I was there just before.

Larry Lee:

And so you're looking at a deficit that could have reached four billion. Back then that was real money.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. It still is. So that's how I organized. I had the good fortune to work on some pretty weighty issues. And could I have picked different spots? Sure, I could have picked different spots. Should I have picked different spots? Hindsight is always 20-20, but I feel good about the three years that I was there. And I felt we put government together.

Larry Lee:

That's a key, key thing when your chief of staff is finding all these department directors and other key appointments the governor does make.

Rick Wiener:

Yep.

Larry Lee:

And budget director was one of the most critical ones at that point.

Rick Wiener:

Yep. And the budget director, you may recall, was the same budget director as Governor Engler had as his final budget director, Mary A. Lannoye.

Larry Lee:

Mary A. Lannoye. Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

... who did a superb job.

Larry Lee:

Yep, because you want somebody who knows what they're doing.

Rick Wiener:

Wanted somebody who knew what they're doing and his loyalties were to this governor, okay. And this governor being Governor Granholm, excuse me.

Larry Lee:

Right. Yeah. What were some of the victories you thought you were able to accomplish when you were dealing with a Republican legislature?

Rick Wiener:

The first road package, it seems like every governor has a road package.

Larry Lee:

We're still dealing with that.

Rick Wiener:

And we're still dealing with the road packages, but that illustrates the nature of the problem which we've kicked down the road. Saving the DMC for the first time. Please remember that before now former Mayor Duggan was there and before he was the CEO of the DMC-

Larry Lee:

Detroit Medical Center.

Rick Wiener:

The Detroit Medical Center, excuse me.

Larry Lee:

Right. Key health provider in Detroit.

Rick Wiener:

That the DMC was on the verge of going belly up. And with it, 350,000 cases of uncompensated care would have to be absorbed. Henry Ford couldn't absorb that.

Larry Lee:

We're talking about one of the largest health complexes in America.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. I mean, it would have been the collapse of the healthcare system in Southeast Michigan. It needed a cash infusion and it needed... Because remember, the governor couldn't do this by administrative fiat. It needed the support of a Republican House and a Republican Senate.

Larry Lee:

Correct.

Rick Wiener:

And we did it.

Larry Lee:

And Mike Duggan must have done-

Rick Wiener:

Well, Democratic House and a Republican Senate.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. Right.

Rick Wiener:

I stand...

Larry Lee:

That is true. Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

... but we needed that.

Larry Lee:

And Mike Duggan must have been a reassuring figure for people looking into who's going to bring DMC out of this.

Rick Wiener:

It was after the fact. Please remember the rescue package, before Mike became public in his interest in doing this. And I'm not even sure whether he had interest before-

Larry Lee:

It was a sign-

Rick Wiener:

... the rescue package because you need something to rescue. And the negotiations with the Senate in particular were decent, protracted, and professional, but high energy.

Larry Lee:

Meaning, that's a loaded term, it sounds like, Rick.

Rick Wiener:

It took a lot of work. It took a lot of work.

Larry Lee:

And the leader of the Senate at that point was-

Rick Wiener:

Was Ken Sikkema.

Larry Lee:

Ken Sikkema, who you developed a wonderful relationship.

Rick Wiener:

I had known Ken since the '70s, and of all of the people that the Senate Republicans could have picked as leader, Ken was the absolute best for me because I knew him. It didn't mean he was going to necessarily do any favors, but one of the things that I think many people lament in politics and government now is the absence of relationships.

Larry Lee:

And civility. Right. Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

We had a relationship and we had certain understandings as to how we would do things. And one of them, I think, deserves note, two of them. One, we decided very early on, amongst our many understandings, some of which I'm not going to talk about, and they're going to die with me, okay?

Larry Lee:

Although it's unfair, but go ahead.

Rick Wiener:

Well, is if there was an issue between us, we would not let it sit overnight. And two, if there was a visit that need to be, I would come to Senator Sikkema's office. And when he asked me why, he said, "You represent the governor." I said, "Because nobody elected me for anything." I always saw that I was an appointed servant, and I don't mean that in the demeaning sense of the term. I was an appointed servant. You got elected to something. I'll come to you." And I did. And those were two of many understandings that we have, and it served us well. And one of the things I was very touched by is, on the day I announced that I was retiring, one of the first person to make a floor statement was Ken Sikkema, and I'm still touched by it.

Larry Lee:

Well, I'm not surprised. He talked about your honesty, integrity, and was very complimentary about how you two worked together.

Rick Wiener:

Well, one of the things I felt, I don't want to say I had to live down, that I had to live with, is I was not just the past Democratic state chair, probably strike one when you're dealing with Republicans, but a known Democratic operative in many campaigns, probably strike two. I did not want there to be a strike three. I went to great pains to make sure that anybody I dealt with... I mean, I had a variety of people. And one I was particularly touched with when I was in private practice, I had to call on for a client to Ruth Johnson.

Larry Lee:

Oh, yeah.

Rick Wiener:

And I went to her with client present, and she made very complimentary remarks, as did a-

Larry Lee:

Another Republican.

Rick Wiener:

.... number of people, a leading Republican.

Larry Lee:

Leading Republican.

Rick Wiener:

And I wanted to be seen as the person who facilitated the governor to be able to govern, that was my job. Did I have a political point of view? Of course, I do, but that wasn't what I saw my job. It was to have the governor's political point of view acted out in government effectively. That was my job.

Larry Lee:

And to you, it probably feels almost impossible to do a job like that without relationships. Relationships matter in politics.

Rick Wiener:

I think they do. I think they still do. And again, I'm retired now a decade, so people tell me that it's harder to form relationships now, and there are probably a variety of factors that cause that. But whether that's accurate or whether the relationships are different or not, in a situation where trust matters, where you have to be able to trust the person that's sitting directly across from you to know that his or her word is good, that he's not making up stuff, and that when he's making up stuff, he's admitting it and getting a good laugh out of it. And I was fortunate to have those kind of relationships with legislators.

Larry Lee:

Well, one of the things you did that was kind of surprising back then and totally stunning would be now, you and Governor Granholm showed up at Ken Sikkema's fundraiser.

Rick Wiener:

I remember that.

Larry Lee:

What led that?

Rick Wiener:

I think people were stunned.

Larry Lee:

Absolutely.

Rick Wiener:

I thought it was a respectful thing to do. And I'm sure there are people who would say that was too much. I didn't show up to other Republican-

Larry Lee:

No.

Rick Wiener:

... but I did show up at Senator Sikkema's because I thought it was a respectful thing to do. I'm also mindful of the fact that there were Republicans who showed up at the governor's inaugural ball, her first and her second, because it wasn't about the office or who was holding it. It was about the institution.

Larry Lee:

The institute, back to that. Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

Whatever else I was or wasn't, I'm an institutionalist and believe that institutions, whether they are NGOs, whether they are faith-based, whether they are governmental matter. And that the people in those institutions are entitled to a certain amount of deference and respect.

Larry Lee:

And so all of that didn't mean that you didn't get pushback from Ken Sikkema on occasion.

Rick Wiener:

All the time.

Larry Lee:

All the time, but-

Rick Wiener:

All the time. It wouldn't...

Larry Lee:

He's still a Republican.

Rick Wiener:

And he got pushback from me. But there was a feeling in all four caucuses, both the Republican caucuses and the Democratic caucus, that at the end of the day, you had to govern. And the Republicans shared that. The Democrats, of course, shared it. It was their governor, but the Republicans shared it, and it mattered.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. When you're talking about governing, you've talked about a governor needing to do 10 things right when they are leading a state like Michigan. Where does that come from?

Rick Wiener:

I've made the observation it was as much for political campaigns as anything. There are 10 decisions you've got to make right. I applied it more to political campaigns, but the same is true in government. Whether the exact number is 10 or not in government, I don't know, but it's a finite number of decisions. Look, we'd all like to be right all the time. I would, you would, but you've got to make a lot of decisions in government. You got to make a lot of decisions in campaigns. You have got to decide what are the 10 you've absolutely got...

Rick Wiener:

... decide what are the 10 you've absolutely got to make right. I knew that getting the DMC right-

Larry Lee:

There you go. One big one.

Rick Wiener:

... was one of those 10. It was absolutely one of those 10s. What were the other nine? I've never really quantified them in terms of government. I have in terms of many campaigns. By the way, Larry, one of the things I found, I couldn't even get to 10 in any of the campaigns that I've done that had to ... I think once the former lieutenant governor and I, John Cherry, were having this conversation, and we got to eight and made up two afterwards just so we could keep the rule-

Larry Lee:

It's a good rule.

Rick Wiener:

... intact.

Larry Lee:

So in trying to get things through, what were big disappointments, say, that you thought was right or should be done and the governor just couldn't get it through?

Rick Wiener:

Oh, I don't know. I haven't really thought about it a lot. I'm not a reflective person. I mean, she was dealing with some very, very tough economic thing. Do I wish we had had, for example, more money to be able to do jobs creation programs? Do I wish we had had more money to do more experimentation in education? You think of those kinds of things. Oh, hell yeah, I wish we'd had more.

And so would every other elected official that's ever been elected ... Almost every other elected official that's ever been elected, and it's no exception. I'm glad for the fact that I was able to serve at a time where we were dealing with crises of magnitude. Do I wish I would have not been dealing with? Do I wish that Governor Granholm would not have been dealing with? Heck yes, in both cases.

Larry Lee:

But what made it rewarding, in a sense, to do with issues of such great magnitude? Why was that a good thing for you?

Rick Wiener:

Because my job was to do good things. I can't give you a better answer than that.

Larry Lee:

Okay.

Rick Wiener:

You're not there ... How can I say this? You're not there to line your pocket, obviously. I took a pay cut when I went into government. Don't regret it for a minute. You're not in it for the pats in the back you're going to get, because if anybody lays an extremity on your body, it is not likely to be on the back, but a little bit lower, and it's not likely to be a hand. It just isn't. You're not doing it for the plaudits. If you're doing it for the right reasons, as I hope I was, it wasn't for the pats on the back and surely wasn't for the next job. It was to help your elected official govern and govern well and govern wisely.

Larry Lee:

And I think you were pleased that the Michigan was recognized as best managed state in the country.

Rick Wiener:

We were tied for second with Virginia and Utah. And the reason we were not ranked with them is the legislature wouldn't raise taxes. And because of that, they felt we needed the rating organization, Governing Magazine, or what's-

Larry Lee:

Governing Magazine, correct. Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

They saw it that we needed more money. So they gave us one mark down Virginia and Utah.

Larry Lee:

Utah could raise money and we couldn't?

Rick Wiener:

Utah.

Larry Lee:

Wow.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. And I was very fortunate when I was chief of staff, I had a guy named Bill Leighty, who was in the National Governors Association, was my mentor chief of staff. He was a different model. He was not a political guy in the sense you and I would use the word, but he had held a lot of jobs in state government along the way. I learned a lot from Bill.

You asked earlier about the way we handled the August 14th crisis. People forget that August 14th was the day the lights went out in 50 million homes in the United States as a result of a breaker switch been thrown around.

Larry Lee:

The great blackout.

Rick Wiener:

You talk about uncharted waters, knowing what the right tone was to set from a communications, knowing how to assemble an emergency team, which we hadn't had to do. We did have an emergency management setting, knowing how to deal with that situation, and a lot of it was just winging it.

Larry Lee:

Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

And when we did a postmortem with people who were seasoned in that area, it turned out we did a lot of stuff right. And I don't want to say we wrote the book on how to do it right, but we wrote a book on how to do it right.

Larry Lee:

Crisis management at a high level.

Rick Wiener:

It was the ultimate crisis. I'd been chief of staff for seven months. I'd never been in a situation like that.

Larry Lee:

Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

And neither had many of the crisis managers who were seasoned been quite.

Larry Lee:

And you didn't know how long it would be before power was back.

Rick Wiener:

One. And two, you had ... I'm sitting there while this is all going on, that I got an aunt on a seventh-story high-rise in Southfield without water or power, who is at that point in time in her late 70s. I mean, in addition to all of the governmental challenges, everybody in that ... I shouldn't say everybody, almost everybody in that emergency management setting center had a human being that was near and dear to heart that was affected and possibly old. Oh, and by the way, it was really hot.

Larry Lee:

It was really hot, right.

Rick Wiener:

It was really hot.

Larry Lee:

Right. And no jobs to go to because nothing could be open.

Rick Wiener:

Nothing could be open. Food spoiling. I mean, just the stories out of that could fill up another taping, believe me. But I mean, just little things like spoiled food.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. Do you recall your first conversation with the governor when that crisis hit?

Rick Wiener:

My first conversation was escorting in the emergency manager, excuse me, the governor's detail to say, "Governor, you need to convene the departments to go to the emergency operations center immediately." And they did. That was it. We went over there. We were there for a long time. We went a little bit for sleep, but not for water, obviously.

Larry Lee:

Right.

Rick Wiener:

But it was just amazing. We got through it.

Larry Lee:

You got through it and then tackled other big issues for the rest of the time you were there.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. I mean, there was that ... The appropriate role of charter schools was always an issue. Budget took up a lot more time even then than it is now. And the reason is financially, we're in a better place than we were 20 years ago. And the national economy, while it has its challenges, it was really bad 20 years ago.

Larry Lee:

Yeah, it was. I mean-

Rick Wiener:

And budget ... When you don't have enough money, you're dealing with the budget equivalent of Sophie's Choice.

Larry Lee:

And everything looks essential that you're doing as a governor.

Rick Wiener:

Everything looks essential, and every cut matters. And what becomes your focus? Is it cutting whole programs, or is it a little bit here, a little bit there? Just figuring out how to do that, whether you can do the least amount of harm and which philosophy is the right one is challenging in and of its own right.

Larry Lee:

And so some three years into this, governor, you're still there, though. The governor is looking at a second term, is thinking about not running for a second term, which would have been a shocking thing, but apparently was true. And a quote I love from you is that you told the governor, "With all due respect, this is crazy."

Rick Wiener:

Well, I said that, and I actually said something stronger, quite frankly. I can be more than a bit salty on occasions. In fact, some would argue on more than occasions. And I remember that when she said that, it is one of the few times I swore in front of her. I thought it was crazy. I assumed she was going to get reelected.

Larry Lee:

And she did.

Rick Wiener:

And handily.

Larry Lee:

Handily, yeah.

Rick Wiener:

I knew that ... And you could feel how the issues were shaping up. And I felt good in leaving because I felt she was in really good shape for a second term. What I didn't anticipate was those degree of personal hesitance, which not unreasonable, but weren't necessary.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. I mean, she was expressing just whether she was the right candidate to be governor again and whether other people in the Democratic Party would have done a better job.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. Well, one will never know who would have done an optimal job because only one person was picked, and that was her. Did she do a damn good job in a tough economy, managing tough budgets, avoiding the meltdown of what have been the social safety net? Absolutely. There should be no doubt about that. Was it an optimal time for her to serve? It was a tough time to serve. It was. It was a tough economy.

Larry Lee:

Yeah. Did you think maybe you could get a democratic legislature and get more things done? Was that optimistic point of view there?

Rick Wiener:

Well, we did. I misspoke earlier. Obviously, we had a Republican House when she came in. She got a Democratic House in her second term for at least part of it, I believe for all of it.

Larry Lee:

Right.

Rick Wiener:

But never a Democratic ... Could she have done better things? One would hope she would have done different things and hopefully they were better. I think they would have been better. Having said that, would they have required a need to raise revenues, and would the legislature have had the same appetite for that as it did in 1983? I don't know.

Larry Lee:

Right. Yeah. Hard to know.

Rick Wiener:

That's why you'd never get a chance to do a remake. I assume if I screwed something really bad up here, I get a remake on it at some point, but you don't get a remake in real life. And we did, I think, as good a job. I think she did a great job. She did a perfect job. She wouldn't claim that. She wouldn't claim that. But in the tough circumstances, she was a good leader, strong leader.

Larry Lee:

So then when you left as chief of staff, she was committed for the reelection, and you said you weren't out of gas, but you could see the light blinking. And-

Rick Wiener:

I said that, and of course, as you know, I got quite ill the following year.

Larry Lee:

You did, very seriously.

Rick Wiener:

And I have no idea. Maybe it was timing, maybe it had nothing to do with it. Maybe-

Larry Lee:

You don't know.

Rick Wiener:

I don't know. I mean, I don't know. All I know is sequentially, I got quite sick the next year. It was probably a year and a half, so it's probably a good thing that I left because I wouldn't have gotten healthier from that, but I was pretty gassed. The light was blinking. And, again, I understand there were three jobs I had, and I could only do two of them. And the third one was get adequate rest.

Larry Lee:

Right. Which you started to do and then had health issues and then-

Rick Wiener:

It's hard.

Larry Lee:

Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

And part of it's my own personality in that regard. It just is. It's how I'm wired.

Larry Lee:

So now as you sit here and you're retired, semi-retired, whatever you-

Rick Wiener:

I am retired.

Larry Lee:

You're trying to pass this one as being fully retired. What do you think about the current state of affairs and-

Rick Wiener:

I'm glad I'm retired.

Larry Lee:

Are you glad you're not here with instant communication and instant reaction to everything you say?

Rick Wiener:

When we ... Ironically, it was a ... I had a PalmPilot. You are old enough to remember what a PalmPilot is, the precursor to iPhones. And as I recall, Lynda Rossi was the first to have it as a-

Larry Lee:

Wow. Okay.

Rick Wiener:

She's younger than me, a lot more. She was Lieutenant Governor's Chief of Staff, for those who don't know Lynda. And the governor was averse to taking one at first. Within a week or two of my leaving, I'm told she had a PalmPilot, and my understanding was life was never the same.

Larry Lee:

There it goes.

Rick Wiener:

But everything is ... I mean, we could count on there being a news cycle. We could count on people not checking their email at all hours of the day and night. They began to check it a lot, but not all hours of the day and night. Communications were, by our standards today, primitive. They weren't primitive, but they were primitive. There was one news cycle. Now there's one news cycle whenever somebody wants one. It's just-

Larry Lee:

It might last just a few hours. It's like then something else huge.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. So I would not ... Part of it is people 30, 40 years younger than me are wired different than me. So it's different in that regard. So me to put myself in their shoes is unfair to both of us. Could I do what I did then, what I do now? I wouldn't want to. And even if I were younger, I can understand why there's a chilling effect. And it's not just the rhetoric. It's not just what some would call mean-spiritedness, certainly a greater degree of partisanship. I don't know that the relationships, what we got back to, allow the type of politics, the type of governance that I'm most familiar with. Maybe I'm a fossil in that regard.

Larry Lee:

No, I think that's true. So ... I mean, do you have any optimism of what could trigger getting back to relationships that create that kind of atmosphere that you worked in so long?

Rick Wiener:

I do not. I think that ... Two things, people tend to blame term limits a lot. You don't have term limits in DC. Term limits aren't the fault. I used to say one of the problems with forming relationships was freeways. And the reason ... When I started at the Capitol in 1971, most everybody stayed overnight, and they went across the street.

Larry Lee:

They roomed together.

Rick Wiener:

They roomed together. Republicans, Democrats, they roomed together. They drank together. Whether you're a teetotaler, even if you were a teetotaler, you want to have a Coke or something like that. Bill Ryan, the speaker when I started in 1971, called session between at 8:00 Monday nights.

Larry Lee:

Monday night.

Rick Wiener:

Why? And it lasted almost exactly 50 minutes, much like a classroom. Why? Did they do anything? Generally not.

Larry Lee:

Hardly ever.

Rick Wiener:

They took attendance and went across the street and networked, what we called network, today, what they would call carousing them.

Larry Lee:

More or less. Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

And you're not going to ... I mean, there's a lot of reasons. Instant communication is one of them. There's all kinds of reasons why. I'm not one to blame term limits solely for it. It's one of the signs of the times, much as freeways are times. I mean, a lot of people commute back and forth to Detroit, commute back and forth to Saginaw, commute back and forth to Grand Rapids. Ken Sikkema went home every night.

Larry Lee:

Every night, right.

Rick Wiener:

And all kinds of people go home every night. When you're home, you're not talking to your colleagues. You are talking to your constituents. I don't denigrate the importance of that, but you're not talking to your colleagues. You're not establishing those relationships.

Larry Lee:

Right. Senator Levin, after he had retired, in interviews, said that not everybody can be elected, but everybody can get involved if they're not happy with what's going on, find people they support and do that. Your career has been amazing in that regard about being involved at all kinds of levels. Did you ever think that you could have run for office?

Rick Wiener:

I thought about it for a few days, and I'll tell you exactly when. I thought about it, it was 1982. I was working on the Blanchard campaign. Totally unexpectedly, Bill Brodhead announced he was not running for reelection.

Larry Lee:

Late in the game.

Rick Wiener:

Oh, it was fairly well, February, March, something in... And I was stunned by it. I said, "That's my district. I could win that district."

Larry Lee:

Didn't that district get drawn for Bill Brodhead?

Rick Wiener:

Yes. Yeah, it got drawn but-

Larry Lee:

That was the controversy.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. And he said, "I'm not running." And I said, "I could win this district." And I thought about it, actually went and talked to a few people on it, and I finally came to the conclusion, well, I gave my word to Jim Blanchard that I'm going to be here for the count. I'm going to be here for the count, end of the issue. Two days later, Sandy Levin announced he was running. I said, "Well, probably it was a wise decision because at least it didn't look like I got pushed out or anything like that."

But that's the only time I thought about it a little bit. Other times, maybe for a half hour. I mean, other times. But no, I never really thought myself ... I thought I had a pretty good niche, and I felt good about having a niche of being pretty good at helping men and women whose values I agreed with get elected to office and act that out. And I thought it was a good niche for me, and I was going to ride that pony as long as the back on that pony held out.

Larry Lee:

And it did. And so now what are you involved in? What are you doing now to keep your finger on the pulse?

Rick Wiener:

I help an occasional candidate as a volunteer. I go to fundraisers a lot. I'm involved in some volunteer activities. I'm the immediate past president of the downtown synagogue in Detroit following the murder of the president a number of years, three years ago. I became president, and I'm the president of the Historical Society of Michigan, which I love.

Larry Lee:

Nonpartisan, just good stuff about our history.

Rick Wiener:

Yeah. It's not a partisan organization. We've had ... Well, the person who originally recruited me to the organization was former state Senator Tom George 20 years ago, who asked me to ... Tom George is a Republican.

Larry Lee:

Correct. Yeah.

Rick Wiener:

And there are other Republicans, Democrats, people that I don't have a clue are there, they're partisan. It cares about Michigan's history, and that's what it does. And I like that. It gives me a lot of joy to help build that organization.

Larry Lee:

Well, Rick, thanks for sharing your experience in Michigan history. It's been really incredibly interesting and fun to know that.

Rick Wiener:

Well, thank you, Larry.