

**Interview with Governor James J. Florio
by Michael Aron**

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This first of several retrospective interviews with Governor Florio focuses on his early political career from his entry into Camden County politics in 1963 through the fall of 1989 when it became clear that he was about to be elected Governor of New Jersey.

Michael Aron: It's the morning of August 6th, 2012. We are at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. I'm Michael Aron, chief political correspondent of NJTV. We're here this morning to begin a series of interviews with former Governor Jim Florio about his time as governor, how he got to be governor, what he accomplished as governor. We're probably going to do this in three, four, five sessions. But we're going to start at the beginning, how he got involved and interested in politics.

Michael Aron: Governor Florio, good morning.

Governor James Florio: Good morning.

Michael Aron: Let's begin with how you got interested in politics. At what time in your life did you begin to feel an interest in politics?

Governor James Florio: Well, when I was in college at Trenton State Teachers College, I ran for student president, student government president. And I was elected. I was impressed with the whole process of getting elected, persuading people. I went to graduate school at Columbia in the area of public law and government. And I had intended to actually be an academic political scientist.

While I was in school, Richard Neustadt, who was a fairly prominent political scientist, came back from the Kennedy administration and inspired me, among other people I suspect, to actually not teach about government, but to go become involved in government.

I decided if I was going to be involved with government, I guess I had to be a lawyer, which of course was not the case, but I didn't know any better at the time. So, I went to Rutgers Law School in Camden, moved down to Camden in 1963. I had to work for a year to earn the money to go to law school. But in 1964, I enrolled in Rutgers law school, and also became involved in local politics in Camden city, at that point. And it was a traditional, old style political machine. And I wrote a letter to the mayor, Mayor Pierce, at the time [*Alfred Pierce; Mayor of Camden from 1959-1969*], and said that I wanted to get involved, but I couldn't find anybody who was willing to open the doors for me. He was very responsive, sent the local ward leader around to talk with me. And we got off very well. We hit it off very well, a fellow named Armand Paglione, who was the 12th District ward leader. And he

asked me if I would be willing to be the district leader, which is a subset of the ward.

Michael Aron: How old were you?

Governor James Florio: I was about 23, 24. And so, I said yes. So, while I was going to law school, I was also the district leader in the political organization, registered all my 600 voters in the district very diligently, and came to work in the young democrats at the same time. By the time I got out of law school, I already had some inklings of being involved in politics.

Michael Aron: Trenton State Teachers College is today the College of New Jersey.

Governor James Florio: That's right. And by the way, tuition at that point was \$150 a year.

Michael Aron: Richard Neustadt was pretty famous for his book--

Governor James Florio: Presidential scholar.

Michael Aron: Presidential politics. [Neustadt; *Presidential Power*; 1960]

Governor James Florio: Very impressive book, in terms of the concentration-- the difference between power, the perception of it, and the reality of it. The conclusion of the book is that the president's power really is the power of the pulpit, the power to persuade, but he spends most of his time trying to get people who work for him to do what he's supposed to be doing-- what they're supposed to be doing. So, it's a really interesting book.

Michael Aron: Let's go back even farther. You grew up in Brooklyn? That's the legend, anyway.

Governor James Florio: Yes, that's true.

Michael Aron: Your father and mother?

Governor James Florio: My father was a shipyard worker, worked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. How I got to New Jersey was the Brooklyn Navy Yard closed. And my father started working out of the Hoboken shipyards and the Bayonne shipyards, at the time.

Michael Aron: When you were how old?

Governor James Florio: When I was a teenager - when I was 17 - while I still lived in Brooklyn, I quit high school. And I joined the Navy. I went into the Navy, got my G.E.D. diploma while I was in the service. And when I got out of the service, I was a Jersey person. My parents had moved to Lake Hopatcong to a summer

house that they converted into a winter house. But when I got out of high school, I also went-- when I got out of the service, rather, I also went to Trenton State Teachers College.

Michael Aron: What'd you do-- where'd you go in the service? Where did the Navy take you?

Governor James Florio: I was a weatherman. I was a meteorologist. I spent two years in Kodiak, Alaska, and two years in Key West, Florida.

Michael Aron: And again, part of the Florio legend is that you fought with your fists in the Navy. Is that--?

Governor James Florio: I did. I was a boxer in the Navy. Interesting life, not that I'd want to have to do that for a full time job. Actually, it helps you in politics know how to dodge punches.

Michael Aron: So, you decided to go to law school. You went to Camden from Lake Hopatcong. That had been your home, Lake Hopatcong?

Governor James Florio: I really never lived there. My parents lived there. But when I got out of the service, I went right to college.

Michael Aron: Okay. So, College of New Jersey, Columbia, Rutgers law school, and you're now a district leader in Camden, what was the Camden-- was it a machine? You say it was a machine.

Governor James Florio: It was a good old-fashioned political organization, yeah.

Michael Aron: Was it honest?

Governor James Florio: I'm sorry.

Michael Aron: Was it honest?

Governor James Florio: Was it honest? As far as I knew it was, but I mean honesty was defined in different ways in those days. When there was money distributed to district leaders, some of which got to where it was supposed to get to. But it was old-fashioned organization.

Michael Aron: Successful?

Governor James Florio: Very successful down there, at that point, yes, largely based in the City of Camden, though. The suburban areas were all Republican, and that has changed over the years, obviously. But it was a political organization. There was a fellow, an old fellow, Mayor Brunner [*George E. Brunner, Mayor of Camden from 1936-1959*], who was one of the political bosses on a statewide

basis. You go through-- read through New Jersey political history about the '40s and the '50s, Mayor Brunner was one of the big deals.

Michael Aron: Was he a Camden mayor?

Governor James Florio: Camden mayor.

Michael Aron: At some point, the machine became the Errichetti machine. At what point, do you recall?

Governor James Florio: Well, around the early '70s became-- Mayor Errichetti was formerly the city director of public works, if I recall correctly. And he became the city political boss. And he became political mayor. [*Angelo Errichetti; Mayor of Camden from 1973-1981*] And then he became the state senator.

Michael Aron: Right. And then, he got caught up in Abscam around 1980, '81. And his career was kind of ruined.

Governor James Florio: Ended.

Michael Aron: And his reputation.

Governor James Florio: And he went to jail.

Michael Aron: He went to jail. At some point, you decided to run for the legislature. Tell us about that.

Governor James Florio: 1969. It was interesting because I had just been out of law school a very short period of time. And it was easy to get the nomination because nobody wanted it. That was year, you may recall, that Governor Cahill got elected. Governor Cahill was a very popular Congressman in Camden, Camden County, South Jersey, the first district. And everyone anticipated it was going to be a big Republican year. And it was. And so, nobody wanted to run in a district that was going to be losing. I did because I didn't know any better. And I won by I think like 160 votes or something of that sort, very small margin. Reverend Woodson from Trenton, and I, and a fellow John Horn, who was my running mate, were the only Democrats elected south of Trenton that year. There was a Republican landslide.

Michael Aron: John Horn who would become a cabinet officer in the Byrne administration.

Governor James Florio: That's correct. So, I was actually-- while I was in law school, I was a staff person-- in those days, they didn't really have great staffs, but they had a little bit of money they provided to some staff people. And I'd go to the legislature with John when he was in office. I learned a little bit about the

legislature. And then the next year, as soon as I graduated from law school, there was an opening there. And I ran for it. And I was elected.

Michael Aron: Do you remember how you presented yourself to the voters that first time out?

Governor James Florio: Yeah, I was very active in the Young Democrats, and therefore I was out there doing a whole lot of things. I'd show up at Kiwanis meetings and Chamber of Commerce meetings and things like of that sort. So, I actively solicited opportunities to go out and talk to people, which in those days was not the norm under the old machine system. All you had to do was get the support of the bosses, and they delivered the vote. I sort of, I guess, was a little bit ahead of the times and said I'm going to go out and develop my own constituency. I was involved in environmental matters before anybody really paid attention to environmental matters, had the big support of some of the environmental groups, and started to develop my own sort of cadre of folks who were enthusiastic about the things I was talking about

Michael Aron: Who else did you say besides John Horn?

Governor James Florio: Reverend Woodson. [*S. Howard Woodson; State Assemblyman from 1963-1976; Assembly Speaker from 1974-1976*]

Michael Aron: Reverend Woodson in Trenton.

Governor James Florio: Who became the speaker.

Michael Aron: First African American Speaker of the Assembly. Did you present yourself as an anti-machine candidate, or a reform candidate, or wasn't it necessary at that time?

Governor James Florio: No. I tried to present myself as a substantive candidate, somebody that knew something about some of the issues, and went out and was fairly successful in the suburban areas, particularly, because that was not what people expected out of city politicians.

Michael Aron: What were you doing for a living at this time?

Governor James Florio: Well, at that point, I had my own law practice that I had just started. I think my first year I made \$6000 as a single practitioner doing a lot of night court work, and that sort of thing.

Michael Aron: Did politics help the law business?

Governor James Florio: I suspect probably so, a little bit, in terms of just people knowing who you were. I remember a woman writer for the Philadelphia magazine came and interviewed me as a new young assemblyman, wrote this nice story in the magazine about me. And she asked me, my little office that I had, what is the nature of your practice. I had to grovel around for a couple of minutes to think about what it was. I had a divorce matter on my desk. So, I said I'm a divorce

lawyer, which I had a couple of cases. But she wrote it up. As a result of that, I started getting divorce cases, as a result of the magazine article.

Michael Aron: Were you married, yet?

Governor James Florio: I was. I had three children.

Michael Aron: Already had three children by that point.

Governor James Florio: Well, I worked my way through law school as a night watchman at Woodrow Wilson High School. I worked-- I can't even remember how much money I made, but not a whole lot. Well, I worked from six o'clock at night until two o'clock in the morning. That was how I earned my living.

Michael Aron: Woodrow Wilson High School still exists there in Camden.

Governor James Florio: Yes, yes. I just drove by my house, 62 28th Street in Camden. It's in a little bit of disarray.

Michael Aron: What caused you to just drive by?

Governor James Florio: I drove by because I was part of a program with the mayor the other day about a program about regional plan association that I'm involved with, trying to do some rehabilitation in the East Camden neighborhood, which is where I'm from.

Michael Aron: How did you find the legislature?

Governor James Florio: Well, it's obviously intriguing for me not knowing a whole lot about political process. But it was good. The frustrating part was there was no staff. It was not a particularly well-developed committee system. So, you were effectively on your own. Being diligent, being idealistic and conscientious, I spent a lot of time at the library doing my own research so I would make decisions that were right. Took on a couple of different issues, tenant's rights is one of the issues I was involved with. Some of the environmental issues I became involved with, as well. But it was frustrating having no staff and having to do your own research, which was interesting because when I went to Congress, totally different in a much better way.

Michael Aron: And today they say that the legislature is much more like Congress in terms of staffing and support.

Governor James Florio: Well, it's true.

Michael Aron: Were there committees in those days?

Governor James Florio: There were committees.

Michael Aron: Did you sit on-- do you remember what you sat on?

Governor James Florio: Actually I became the chairman of the state government committee, which interestingly enough--

Michael Aron: In the assembly?

Governor James Florio: Of the assembly. I was there for six years. I got elected three times. So, I became the chairman at one point. And one of the most memorable occasions I remember was the redistricting that took place, Congressional redistricting. In those days, the legislature did it. I remember being called and wooed by a whole bunch of congressman telling me how important they were, and that was essential that their districts be preserved. I always remember that.

Michael Aron: Who was the congressman from your part of the state, at that time?

Governor James Florio: At that point, Congressman John Hunt, who I subsequently was victorious over.

Michael Aron: He was a Republican?

Governor James Florio: He was a Republican, very conservative fellow, former sheriff, former state policeman, law and order. And I ran against him in 1972 and lost.

Michael Aron: You were in a hurry.

Governor James Florio: Well, opportunities presented themselves and I took advantage of the opportunities. '72, as you may recall, was the McGovern, Nixon year, when the Democrats got totally wiped out. And interestingly enough, I lost, but I lost by a fairly small margin. And so, that set me up for the next time to run.

Michael Aron: Today that part of the state is just so solidly Democratic, but you say that in that time the city of Camden was Democrat and the surrounding suburbs leaned Republican?

Governor James Florio: And the rural parts of Gloucester County were solidly Republican. I was the first Democrat elected in 102 years in the first congressional district. So, you're right. It's changed dramatically over the last twenty, thirty years.

Michael Aron: Did you get anything done? You were in the minority in the Cahill years, right?

Governor James Florio: The Cahill years, actually no. The first time it was. But I was-- in the Cahill years, I was in the minority, but we got a lot done. In those days, there was much more-- much less partisanship. So there's much collaboration, more than is the case now.

Michael Aron: Why do you think that is?

Governor James Florio: You haven't got the time to go into it - money, consultants. Consultants, really, I would blame the most. Consultants who are interested exclusively in elections, not in governing. So, the advice they give to win an election almost precludes effective governing.

Michael Aron: So, you ran for the Assembly in '69, got sworn in in '70, and by '72 you already had your sights set on federal office?

Governor James Florio: True.

Michael Aron: And then came Watergate. How did that affect you?

Governor James Florio: Well, that was obviously the thing that helped. I mean in the '72 election that I lost, I was beaten up by the incumbent Congressman as being in favor of three A's, abortion, amnesty, and acid-- drugs. So, that was sort of the standard line that year against Democrats.

Michael Aron: Amnesty for draft dodgers?

Governor James Florio: For draft dodgers, right. The Vietnam War, we were coming out of the Vietnam War. So, it was an interesting turn around. But then I did well. I did a lot of retail campaigning, doing coffee klatches. I got to be known as the coffee klatch congressman. Someone would say to me I want to help you. I like you. Well, put twenty people in your living room next Wednesday, I'll bring the donuts and the coffee. And we'll talk. So, I did that enough. And actually I ended up doing it in my congressional career, as well. And after a while, we converted the district over to a very strong Democratic district doing that sort of retail politics.

Michael Aron: Did you enjoy that part of it?

Governor James Florio: Very much so. One of the most enjoyable parts of my life.

Michael Aron: So, you beat Mr. Hunt in what year?

Governor James Florio: 1974.

Michael Aron: '74, both the post-Watergate--

Governor James Florio: Well, that was the Watergate issue. That year, you may recall, President Nixon resigned in August of that year. In November, the Republican Party got wiped out.

Michael Aron: When do you think that the thought of running for governor occurred?

Governor James Florio: Well, in 1977, you may recall that Governor Byrne was not doing well in the polls. And there was a lot of speculation that he would not even run. And so, I said if he's not going to run, maybe I should give some thought to running. I'm very conscious of South Jersey. It was really the area I was from. And there was a sense that somehow South Jersey was not getting its fair share of things. And so, I was going to run as the South Jersey candidate. And I didn't really know what I was doing for the most part. And I proved it in the course of the campaign that I didn't know what I was doing in running a primary. But what really prompted me to run was the expectation that Governor Byrne would not run. I actually approached Governor Byrne when I started thinking about it. And I said, "Governor Byrne, I will support you. But if you're not going to run, I'm more interested in running." And he, very cleverly-- we've joked about this over the years, very cleverly sort of led me on saying I don't know, I don't think so, who knows, whatever, whatever. And they keep on doing that right up to the very end. In the end, when he said he was going to run, I'd already been totally committed intellectually and had people supporting me. So that I ran. I later found out-- and Dick Leone was a friend, recounted to me, as well as Governor Byrne, there was a conscious effort on their part that the Governor-- popularity was not as great as it could be. And I a primary race with seven people or eight people in it, he could win, which is what he did with a very small number, but with eight people dividing up the vote, that was a good thing. So they were encouraging me to run without really telling me so.

Michael Aron: What caused him such difficulty in that first term was his commitment to passing an income tax.

Governor James Florio: Right.

Michael Aron: Where had you been on that issue?

Governor James Florio: Well, actually I was out of the Congress by the time that they finally voted-- out of the legislature by the time they voted. So, I really didn't say a whole lot about what my thoughts were about it. I'm not sure whether I would have been down. Now, obviously, I believe it was the right thing to do. But at the time, I was much younger and probably a little bit less responsible. I'm not sure how I would have voted.

Michael Aron: You didn't have to give up your Congressional seat to run in the Democratic gubernatorial primary.

Governor James Florio: That's right. Actually what I did do was learn what not to do. So, in 1977, I learned how to lose a primary. I learned how to win it after that. So, I won the primary in 1981 when I subsequently ran.

Michael Aron: That's interesting, '77 you learned how to use a primary. '81, you learned how to win a primary, but lose the general. And '89, you put it all together.

Governor James Florio: While I was in Washington, I was doing a lot of fairly important things. I enjoyed the time in Congress. It was a great learning experience. I learned a lot while I was there and got some substantive things done.

Michael Aron: Like?

Governor James Florio: Well, many of the environmental laws. I was very much involved with that. I was very much involved with railroads and many of the railroad laws, the privatization of CONRAIL, the preservation of railroad employee retirement. I still have a great number of people who are friends from my railroad days. And I have a nice reputation with some of those folks because we preserved, as you may not remember, the railroad industry in the country was on the verge of going into bankruptcy. The whole railroad industry was falling apart. I was the chairman of the committee that dealt with railroad jurisdiction. So, we were able to put together a system that today is a very good system.

Michael Aron: A rail system or a retirement system?

Governor James Florio: A rail system and a retirement system. The rail retirement system was there. Under the Reagan administration there was an effort to break it up. And so, we preserved that. And a lot of the railroad retirees are very appreciative of that.

Michael Aron: Environmentally, we all remember Superfund, and you were clearly identified as, I guess, the author of the Superfund law. That was in the late '70s, or--?

Governor James Florio: That was in the-- Superfund was the late '70s, under President Carter.

Michael Aron: Under President Carter.

Governor James Florio: Actually it was the last bill that President Carter signed before he left office.

Michael Aron: Really?

Governor James Florio: Yeah.

Michael Aron: What other environmental law--?

Governor James Florio: The Pinelands was something I initiated in Washington to provide for the Pinelands to be designated as a federal reserve, so as to give it the authority to be able to be preserved, also then giving the state of New Jersey the authority to create a system whereby a Pinelands Commission was created. And Governor Byrne did a very good job with Senator Merlino [*State Senator Joe Merlino*] being the key person down there.

Michael Aron: Senator Merlino was the Democratic Senate President, at the time?

Governor James Florio: That's correct.

Michael Aron: Governor Byrne considers preserving the Pinelands as probably his signature legacy--

Governor James Florio: With justification.

Michael Aron: Somehow in my mind, it seems like it was a two step process. He got it done at the state level first, and then you and he came in behind that and federalized it?

Governor James Florio: No, just the opposite.

Michael Aron: Just the opposite?

Governor James Florio: Yeah, the federal level had to be authorized first. In other words, in order to put the system together, you had to have federal legislation to be able to authorize the area to be designated as a federal preserve, which is a conscious designation, which allows for states to come in and put in systems to make sure that the preservation takes place. And that's the way it worked. We passed the federal legislation, very controversial. A lot of the real estate industry people were very unhappy about that because they had planned to develop all of the Pinelands. And so, you may recall, that there was a South Jersey secessionist movement that was really sparked by that. There were some allegations that this was a North Jersey plot to take over water from South Jersey aquifers and pump it either to Philadelphia or to pump it up to North Jersey. Less than rational approach, but it was politically a powerful movement.

Michael Aron: Did it cause you political difficulty?

Governor James Florio: Probably resulted in my losing the '81 election. As you may recall, the election was lost by 1797 votes, which was a number that sticks in my mind indelibly. So, I suspect we probably lost a number of votes as a result of that.

Michael Aron: You say that you embraced the cause of South Jersey, which often felt, and still does, that it gets the short end of the stick relative to North Jersey. And yet, Governor Cahill came out of Camden County. Didn't he redress the imbalance to some degree?

Governor James Florio: Well, there wasn't the sense that he was able to get a whole lot done, not because of him, because of inter-party squabbles on the Republican side. You may recall, Governor Cahill lost the Republican primary as a sitting governor by Congressman Sandman, who was extremely conservative. And it mirrors what's happening now in the Republican Party. Only now it's much more accelerated, the difference between sort of moderate Republicans, which was Governor Cahill, and very right wing conservative candidates, which I think was represented by Senator Sandman.

Michael Aron: Did you have much contact with Cahill when you were in the legislature?

Governor James Florio: Yes. Unfortunately, it wasn't a pleasant contact, but it was a contact. He was very unhappy about some of the things that I'd said in the newspapers. And Governor Cahill was a good-- became a good friend, was very emotional about criticism. I didn't think my criticism was particularly harsh, but I did criticize the administration.

Michael Aron: For what, do you recall?

Governor James Florio: Some policies that I thought were not doing well by urban areas because he was being, obviously, leaned on by Republican suburban legislators. So, I just thought he was not really doing everything for Camden that should be the case. I remember being called into his office one Monday morning. The legislature met in Monday in those days. And he was waving a piece of paper. He said, "Is this yours?" I said, "I don't know what it is." It was a cut out of a newspaper-- a letter to the editor that I had written. And he said, "This is something I just-- you want to be my enemy, don't you?" I said, "No, I'd like to be your friend, but--" He said, "Well you don't write things like this." I said, "I don't write-- you're telling me I can't write things. I mean you should not be paranoid." When I said paranoid, he went of the wall. So, he became very red-faced and unhappy. And for a number of years, we didn't have any relationship. But then later on, we became very good friends. And he was actually very supportive. I never asked him who he actually voted for, but I suspect if push comes to shove, he probably voted for me.

Michael Aron: Over Tom Kean in '81?

Governor James Florio: No, not '81, in '89.

Michael Aron: Or over Jim Courter in '89?

Governor James Florio: Yes, right. But he was a blue collar guy, ex-FBI agent, law enforcement person, very nice man.

Michael Aron: You say that Brendan Byrne, his right hand man, Dick Leone, sort of baited you into that-- running for governor in '77?

Governor James Florio: Yes.

Michael Aron: Fair?

Governor James Florio: They've acknowledged it, very clever, very smart. I mean probably, if it had been one on one, if you recall, Congressman Roe [*Robert Roe*] was the most formidable of the opponents in '81 to Governor Byrne. I really don't think if it had been one on one, Governor Byrne versus Congressman Roe, probably Congressman Roe would have won.

Michael Aron: In '77, you mean.

Governor James Florio: '77, right.

Michael Aron: One on one, Byrne couldn't have won, but one on seven or--

Governor James Florio: I suspect not. One on seven, he was able to win. You may recall, I think he had three or four of his own cabinet members ran against him, which was kind of unprecedented.

Michael Aron: Yes, it certainly was. Wouldn't be tolerated today.

Governor James Florio: I suspect not.

Michael Aron: Did you put together a campaign team? Did you have a campaign manager? Did you have-- did you raise a lot of money?

Governor James Florio: Well, no. We raised no money-- virtually no money. As a matter of fact, when I ran for Congress, the first time I ran, I raised \$12,000. I lost. Second time I ran, I won with \$90,000, which is kind of interesting. Nowadays, you can't run for council with that kind of money at the local level. But what I did is have people who were supportive of me in South Jersey, actually they all still reminisce about how the bus trips-- they would go up to the places in North Jersey and knock on doors, and do the same type of things I did in Congress, running on a statewide basis, which of course you can't do. So, the answer is no. We had no real organization.

Michael Aron: Run that by me again. I didn't quite grasp that. What happened in--?

Governor James Florio: In '77, we had a group of fairly loyal supporters from South Jersey who were my supporters. So, rather than have a statewide organization, I just took the supporters from South Jersey, got into busses, and went around North Jersey, which of course was hopelessly naïve. And the results demonstrated that.

Michael Aron: That's a pretty primitive way of trying to get a message out.

Governor James Florio: Very primitive. Primitive is kind.

Michael Aron: You could just as easily have taken a look at the U.S. Senate as the governorship. Did you look at the U.S. Senate, as well?

Governor James Florio: No.

Michael Aron: Why not?

Governor James Florio: Well, I was in the Congress. And I wanted to be governor. And governor is what I focused on.

Michael Aron: Why? Many House members move up to the U.S. Senate.

Governor James Florio: Again, it's the difference between legislative authority and executive authority. I had seen the benefits and the limitations of legislative authority in the legislature, as well as in the Congress, and wanted to try my hand at being executive. And there are differences between those. And I thought executive would be much more interesting for me to be able influence events, which of course is the motivation for being involved in the whole process, as well. And over and above that, in interacting with the senators, I really had sort of a-- not a condescending approach to senators, but just the idea that members of the House are-- because they're much more specialized, are much more impressive in the depth of what they go into. They're limited in what they go into. So, if you're involved with the environment or railroads or whatever you're involved with, you have much more depth than a senator does because a senator has more of a scope of things. So, I was much more into depth than I was into scope at that period of time.

Michael Aron: Who were are senators in the '70s? Harrison Williams ?.

Governor James Florio: And Clifford Case.

Michael Aron: Clifford Case.

Governor James Florio: Harrison Williams. Bill Bradley, ultimately. Bob Torricelli ultimately. And Senator Lautenberg as well.

Michael Aron: Did you have any personal relationships with any of them?

Governor James Florio: Well, Bill Bradley was the reason I broke with the Democratic organization in South Jersey. You may recall, on the first campaign that he ran in, he ran for Senate against the organization effort, which was on behalf of Dick Leone. Governor Byrne wanted Dick Leone. Angelo Errichetti wanted Dick

Leone. Everybody wanted Dick Leone. And they told me, as the Congressman-- I was a young Congressman, at that point, that I had to go along with them. At that point, I really didn't care very much for Dick Leone, who has become a good fast friend. But in those days, as we were all young and arrogant, he happened to be young and particularly arrogant, at that point. He's mellowed over the years. So, I just said I was not supporting him. The organization in Camden said if you're not supporting him, we're going to throw you off the ticket. I said throw me off the ticket, and I'll run my own line-- run my own campaign.

Michael Aron: This is '78?

Governor James Florio: This is '78. And so, what happens? I ran my own line, but then they discouraged me from doing that by saying we'll give you your own line. We won't challenge you, but you can't run with the freeholders. You can run with Bradley, and that's all. So, Bradley and I won. And obviously he won the state. And he won Camden County overwhelmingly. So, that was my first open break with the political organization in Camden. That was subsequently followed up the next year when I ran a whole line of candidates for freeholder in assembly, and was successful. And therefore, the people who had been in the old machine sort of moved on.

Michael Aron: Was Lewis Katz with you? Or was he--?

Governor James Florio: He was with me.

Michael Aron: He was with you.

Governor James Florio: Yeah.

Michael Aron: Did you have a Dick Leone type, yet, in your political life, a right hand man, a fellow-- someone who helped you think things through?

Governor James Florio: Not at that point, later on I picked up some people. But for the most part, it was by the seat of my pants.

Michael Aron: And you knew-- you were still, what, in your late twenties or early thirties at this point?

Governor James Florio: Late twenties.

Michael Aron: And you knew that being governor would be more satisfying than being a U.S. Senator?

Governor James Florio: Well, it was going to be different. And I knew that executive power is much more focused. I mean you may not have the same depth that you can go into as a legislator, but you have more authority, more scope, and of course, as we all know, the governorship in New Jersey has the most power of

any governorship in the country. So, I was interested in taking on responsibility as an executive.

Michael Aron: And I find what you say about the difference between a senator and a house member interesting. I've never heard that before.

Governor James Florio: Well, I tease my friends in the Congress that they can go pontificate about all they want to, but they have not responsibility for implementing. On the other hand, governors, mayors, presidents, executives, they are held to responsibility for everything. So, that's the big difference.

Michael Aron: How about Congress as compared to the state legislature, how did that compare?

Governor James Florio: No comparison. In the Congress, you have access to information beyond your capability of absorbing. I mean it's very satisfying, as a Congressman particularly, and I was very early on a chairman, which one of the things that we formed--

Michael Aron: What was your committee?

Governor James Florio: I was committee on dealing with healthcare, dealing rather with environmental matters, transportation. I had jurisdiction over commerce, which of course is a broad topic. And jurisdiction in the Congress works by the Parliamentarian's rulings, as well as the title of your committee encompasses what you want to deal with. By virtue of having jurisdiction over matters of commerce, you have jurisdiction over everything if you're creative enough. So, we were creative. I had hearings on boxing. I had hearings on the Federal Trade Commission, a whole lot of areas. So, I was very expansive in our jurisdiction.

Michael Aron: Why did you have hearings on boxing?

Governor James Florio: It's a matter of commerce. Boxing is in commerce. So, all you have to do is--

Michael Aron: Were there problems with boxing back then?

Governor James Florio: Oh, there absolutely were. There were problems and there still are in terms of the way it's managed, the way it's organized, the way boxers are dealt with. There's no pension system, things of that sort. So, yes there are. But I guess the point I wanted to make was that, in the House of Representatives particularly, seniority was eliminated. One of the reforms that the Watergate people, myself included, put into effect was that you didn't have to only advance by seniority. The way it was before that, you'd have to be there for thirty years before you became a chairman of a committee. We made it much more democratic with a small D, and you could compete and seek election to chairmanship. I was there for about two years. And I competed for a chairmanship and was successful.

Michael Aron: A full committee or a subcommittee?

Governor James Florio: Of a subcommittee. And seniority was for subcommittees and full committee memberships.

Michael Aron: You mentioned hearings on boxing and one other topic I don't remember.

Governor James Florio: We had insurance. I had jurisdiction over insurance because we argued that that was in commerce. And frankly, there's nothing that's not in commerce. So, we had a good ability, and I had a fellow, Greg Lawler, who was my staff person in the committee, who was very, very good at making arguments as to why we had jurisdiction over all the things we wanted to have jurisdiction over.

Michael Aron: Insurance would become a big topic in your governorship. And Greg Lawler, 14, 15 years later would go to work on some of those issues with you.

Governor James Florio: Yeah. And the ironic part of it, which was troubling to some, particularly in the insurance industry, is the Federal government doesn't have a whole lot of jurisdiction over insurance because for the most part, insurance is a state regulated entity. We made the argument that were some aspects of insurance that did have federal ramifications, and therefore laws we wanted to improve upon had jurisdiction for our committee.

Michael Aron: So, you were fairly aggressive as a Congressman in tackling issues.

Governor James Florio: Creative.

Michael Aron: Creative. Having broken with the party establishment on the Bradley, Leone race, did that endear you to Bill Bradley? Did you come to have a close relationship?

Governor James Florio: We had a working relationship with Bill. He was very helpful to us in getting the Pinelands bill passed. He was very helpful on the Superfund on the Senate side. As a matter of fact, we had a couple of problems at the end that we had to get done. We got done-- both bills done in the House fairly early on. The Senate is much more difficult. So, I used to work very closely with him on those types of issues, particularly.

Michael Aron: It was also, you say, your first serious break with the party establishment in Camden County, which by this point was pretty much controlled by Angelo Errichetti, who was the both the mayor and a state senator.

Governor James Florio: Right.

Michael Aron: Was he county chairman, as well?

Governor James Florio: He was effective de facto county chairman. He was not the title, but he really ran the county.

Michael Aron: So, a year or two later when he falls afoul of the law in Abscam, conveniently you've already broken with him. Is that fair to--?

Governor James Florio: Well, that's the case, but actually even before that. We had effective control of the political effort. And then we brought in a whole lot of good people.

Michael Aron: Like who?

Governor James Florio: Lou Greenwald's mother, Maria Barnaby Greenwald.

Michael Aron: Maria Barnaby Greenwald, Mayor of Cherry Hill.

Governor James Florio: We advertised for candidates in the paper. When we were saying we were opening the process, we advertised. She applied. I remember going to her house and little Louis was there. And she gave me a piece of cheesecake because I told her I liked cheesecake. And she had made a cheesecake. And we attracted a whole lot of very, very good people.

Michael Aron: So, was the Democratic Party divided at that point between the regulars and the reformers?

Governor James Florio: Well, by that time, the regulars were slipping off into obscurity. So, it really was a fairly quick turnover of authority.

Michael Aron: Was Rob Andrews around?

Governor James Florio: Rob Andrews was around. Rob Andrews was around. He was a young man. Rob Andrews and Joe Roberts were two young men from Belmar, one of the towns down there. Both of them worked with me as campaign volunteers. Joe Roberts ultimately worked as a staff person in my campaign office. And both of them became freeholders and went on to Congress and speaker of the general assembly. Those are the type of people we attracted to politics. And as a result of that, we converted Camden County, which had been Republican into a Democratic stronghold.

Michael Aron: Were you the leader?

Governor James Florio: I had no titles, but I mean people ran on our ticket, yes.

Michael Aron: Tell me a little more about how in the House of Representatives the seniority system changed. You say it was the post-Watergate generation that said we're not going to tolerate the old system?

Governor James Florio: Actually, the year of our election, we changed the rules. In other words, we got elected in November of 1974. And in the organizing of the next Congress, we changed all the rules.

Michael Aron: And said-- how did the rules change?

Governor James Florio: Well, the rules changed because it was not automatically seniority, there were going to be contested elections for president, for chairman of the full committee, and chairman of the subcommittees.

Michael Aron: So, you had to run for the chairmanship of the subcommittee?

Governor James Florio: Yes.

Michael Aron: When you decided to run in the crowded 1977 gubernatorial primary, how did you position yourself? What did-- what were those people from South Jersey getting on a bus and going up to North Jersey-- what was the message?

Governor James Florio: Well, the message was I delivered in Congress now for a couple of years, three years or so, and I could bring the same type of skills to the state. It was a very not particularly depth loaded message. It was a lot of retail stuff. I was trying to do that same type of thing I'd done in Congress, or in the legislature, by getting out and meeting people, trying to convince them that I knew what I was talking about. I wasn't grotesque or offensive, that I would just go and try and convince them that I knew what I was talking about.

Michael Aron: How old would you have been in 1977? What year were you born?

Governor James Florio: 1937.

Michael Aron: Born in '37, so you were 40 years old, which is not too young to-- I mean John Degnan [ph?] ran for governor at 34. So, you were ready in terms of life experience.

Governor James Florio: I was ready, but the fact of the matter is there was just much I didn't know about a whole lot of things. I mean I'm fairly substantive on subject matter matters. But the politics of the state, I was totally naïve about in 1977. I remember going up to meet with the chairman in Essex County. I forget what his name was, but he was an older fellow who was there a long period of time. And he took me to the Newark Club, the old Newark Club, not the new one that's there now. And he was someone who had a reputation as being a big drinker. I was not a big drinker. And he had a triple bourbon for lunch. And he said you should have something to drink. I said I'll have a Coke or whatever I ordered. He says, "No, no, no. When you drink with me, you have to drink real drinks." So, I had whatever I had, a whiskey of some sort. It didn't agree with me very much, but

that just told me how much I didn't know about how you campaign around the state.

Michael Aron: That man's name will pop into my head at some point in the next half hour.

Governor James Florio: Me, as well. I remember, just as another aside, a story about the chairman in Edison, who was a big political leader in Middlesex County. He was a used car salesman. And I remember, I'm a guy. I was in the Congress. I think some minimum degree of deference ought to be given to a congressman. There was no deference given at all. While he was selling cars, he made me sit there about an hour while I went in to try to earn chairman-- he should be supportive of me. It was a humbling experience.

Michael Aron: So, you learned how to interact with people you hadn't been forced to interact with up to that point in time.

Governor James Florio: Yeah, particularly old-fashioned-- people whose time was just about expiring were still in positions of authority in those years. I mean even in the legislature, when I was in the legislature, the state was much more urban oriented. I mean a couple of the counties would get together, the political leaders in Passaic, Hudson, maybe Union, Middlesex would get together. And the five or six people would make policy. And they'd make phone calls to the legislature. And the legislators would all do what they were told. It was a different time. And clearly that's changed now.

Michael Aron: Has it changed so much now?

Governor James Florio: Yeah.

Michael Aron: There's a-- an argument could be made that there's still the South Jersey Democratic machine, the Essex County Democratic machine, and that they can instruct legislators to pass something.

Governor James Florio: We have repositories of that sort of thing, but for the vast majority of people, the vast majority of legislators, almost to a fault one could argue they're independent players. Independent players who in some respects preclude some minimum degree of cohesion so as to be able to get things done. So it has changed.

Michael Aron: So you weren't afraid in '77 that by challenging a sitting governor that you would hurt your career?

Governor James Florio: I don't even think I thought about it that much. I mean over the course of my career, I've done a whole lot of things on instinct. For the most part, it worked out reasonably well. But I'm not sure I calculated it that correctly. And of course, everybody-- every candidate that runs thinks they have a chance of winning, notwithstanding the reality of the facts on the ground. So, at

that point, I thought I would replicate what I was able to do in Camden County on a statewide basis. As I said, that was hopelessly naïve.

Michael Aron: Did you hurt yourself in any way politically by running?

Governor James Florio: No, I don't think so.

Michael Aron: Did you help yourself by running?

Governor James Florio: Probably so because I think we all know that New Jersey's a difficult state to campaign in. And just so many people have run twice. In my case, I ran three times. So, you get to be-- people have a much more comfortable feeling with you when they get to meet you and work with you, maybe. I mean if you're particularly offensive and not very good at interacting with people, then it doesn't help you. But if you make sense, it does help you to be exposed to people.

Michael Aron: You had ceased practicing law by the time you were in Congress?

Governor James Florio: In Congress, that's right.

Michael Aron: How were your relations with Brendan Byrne after the '77 primary?

Governor James Florio: Fine. As a matter of fact, I can remember going up to see Governor Byrne with a lot of the labor people from my area, which is interesting because recently there was a medical school just dedicated down in South Jersey. That whole medical-school initiative was launched in the mid-70s by myself and a number of other people as part of an effort to bring a veterans' hospital to South Jersey. The veterans' hospital and the medical school were part of one big project, and what we did under the Carter administration was get money for the veterans' hospital with an anticipated promise of the medical school coming as well. We went up and saw Governor Byrne to get his support for it, and he was supportive, but then, of course, the administration changed in Washington and the Reagan administration took away the money, and so the veterans' hospital never occurred and it's taken all this time to get the medical school created down there.

Michael Aron: But Byrne was cooperative up to the point that he could be helpful.

Governor James Florio: Oh, yeah, very cooperative, and, frankly, as I said, he wasn't unhappy. He was very happy that I ran, so I guess in some respects he might regard me as helpful to him inadvertently.

Michael Aron: And when did you start thinking, "Okay, there's another gubernatorial election in four years, and I'm going to run in that one"?

Governor James Florio: Pretty right away, pretty right away. I thought I had gained enough knowledge about what not to do in a primary election that I could

now overcome that and put together around the state and people who were friends who I had developed a relationship with and were all more inclined to think about the new politics. I mean, the old machine folks were disappearing, and people-- George Zoffinger up in Sussex County, Mike Perrucci in Warren County, people who had become friends of mine and supporters over the years were people who became the new generation of political leaders.

Michael Aron: So did you start running right away, would you say?

Governor James Florio: Well, I didn't start running right away, because my philosophy has always been that substance drives politics. So while I was in Washington, I was able to do substantive things which were helpful to me in terms of getting things done, accomplishments that I could brag about a little bit, and then over and above that, they were things that were being done that were benefitting New Jersey as well. For example, on the environment, you may recall, in the mid-80s we had environmental problems at the Jersey Shore, hypodermic needles washing up, sewage sludge coming. I was working on Superfund for the national basis, but also New Jersey had more Superfund sites than any other state in the Union. My Congressional district had more Superfund sites than any other district in the Union. So I was able to do two things at one point. As you observed before, I became involved with insurance issues. Insurance issues resonated very well in New Jersey at that period of time. So while doing my job in Washington, I was also advancing my goals in the state, as well.

Michael Aron: What were the three most important Congressional accomplishments or issues in terms of being able to present yourself to the state in '81 as a leader?

Governor James Florio: Well, I would say environmental issues, the insurance issues, and open-space preservation issues, which I've always thought of as important as well. I mean, much of the movement for my part and many other people as well on the Pinelands was, as you may recall, in that period of time, there was serious discussion about drilling for oil off the coast of New Jersey, and the pipelines from that oil that would be drilled there would have to go to the Delaware River to the refineries that were there. This concern was, legitimately, if you had a new oil spill of those pipelines, the freshwater aquifer, the underground reservoir, provides the drinking water for all South Jersey, saw it having oil in it. You've just contaminated drinking-water systems, so that's why I wanted to and other people wanted to preserve the Pinelands free from that sort of development.

Michael Aron: So you declared your candidacy for governor in '81. I suppose you did it in early '81. Do you recall doing it?

Governor James Florio: I do. I think I was in Cherry Hill somewhere.

Michael Aron: And how many people ran to be Brendan Byrne's successor on the Democratic side?

Governor James Florio: It was big. It was a lot of enthusiasm.

Michael Aron: A lot of people. Yes.

Governor James Florio: Yeah. I mean, it was a big primary contest, but I won fairly substantially. Again, Bob Roe, who is a friend, was an adversary at that point, as well. But we, unlike some subsequent primaries between colleagues, ours was very collegial.

Michael Aron: Unlike some...

Governor James Florio: Unlike more recent ones.

Michael Aron: Now that I'm thinking about it, that was the year that there were so many candidates for governor on both sides that the New Jersey Monthly magazine, where I was at the time, we put a sardine can on the cover and laid each candidate--

Governor James Florio: I think there was seven or eight on the Democratic side and six or seven on the Republican side.

Michael Aron: I think it was even more than that.

[Note: The 1977 Democratic Primary had seven candidates including Governor Brendan Byrne, Congressmen Jim Florio and Bob Roe, State Senator Ralph DeRose and Byrne's Commerce Commissioner Joe Hoffman.

The 1981 Democratic primary had 13 including Congressman Bob Roe, Newark Mayor Ken Gibson, State Senator Joe Merlino, Attorney General John Degnan, Jersey City Mayor Thomas Smith, State Senator Frank (Pat) Dodd, Assembly Speaker Bill Hamilton, Assemblywoman Barbara McConnell and former Assemblywoman Ann Klein.

Governor James Florio: Maybe.

Michael Aron: Who was your most serious challenger, or rival, for the nomination?

Governor James Florio: Bob Roe, Congressman Roe, yeah. He had a good base of people, construction trades unions, and it broke down almost north-south. A lot of the union people were supporters of mine in the southern part of the state. He got a lot of the supporters in the northern part of the state.

Michael Aron: How did you beat him?

Governor James Florio: A lot of retail, building a good organization of people who normally don't get involved in politics, any of the people I talked to before who we brought into the process. We were able to reach out to people who were not

normally involved in primaries, environmental people, consumer-safety people. Issues that I was involved with in Washington, we were able to bring people in who normally don't get involved.

Michael Aron: Meanwhile, Tom Kean was winning on the Republican side.

Governor James Florio: Right.

Michael Aron: Did you know Tom Kean?

Governor James Florio: I knew him from the Legislature. When I was a staff person in the Legislature, he was there. He was Speaker at one point. He was in the Legislature when I was in the Legislature, as well. We knew each other, but we didn't interact that much.

Michael Aron: How did you think your legislative and congressional experience would serve you in the Governor's office?

Governor James Florio: Well, understanding the legislative process was a very key to a whole lot of success that we had. The legislative process is something that you have to master. It's not automatic. The thing that I did that I guess is somewhat uniquely was to appreciate the fact that the inside players are really very much influenced by the outside players. So I went and played a lot to the outside players.

Michael Aron: What do you mean by "the inside players are influenced a lot"?

Governor James Florio: Well, for example, in Congress, the inside players would be my members of my committee and then the members of the full committee, then the members of the House. Put it together, well, literally a book on inside players. You know, John Jones was very much involved with environmental issues. Frank Smith is a union guy. Someone else is someone who just hates government. So you'd almost have a book on everybody and then you'd figure out how it is I'm going to get to this person on the basis of outside interests. So we'd go appeal, and you'd have to person by person put together the majorities that you wanted to. And that's what the legislative process is about. Some people were persuaded on the merits. Some people have no interests in the merits whatsoever. You have to go find out what their interest is prompted by.

Michael Aron: Who ran your campaign in 1981?

Governor James Florio: 1981, Joe Salema was one of the people who worked for me.

Michael Aron: How did you know Joe Salema?

Governor James Florio: Joe I met when I was campaigning in Gloucester County. He was in William Sound and I met him and he started out with me as sort of a staff guy helping me drive around Gloucester County, which I didn't really know that well, and then ultimately worked his way up to the point of being my office manager and he ran the campaign.

Michael Aron: Your Congressional District office manager?

Governor James Florio: Yes.

Michael Aron: And you entrusted him with the campaign. You thought he was sharp and...

Governor James Florio: And we had a sort of a cadre of people. I mentioned George Zoffinger, Mike Perrucci. We had a number of relatively young people who were not old-time political people, and that was the dynamism we brought to the campaign in the primary election in 1981, which was successful, because politics was changing. I mean, politics was changing dramatically.

Michael Aron: How so?

Governor James Florio: Well, the old machines were evaporating. We had gone through the process of trying to get people involved with the-- Well, the McGovern approach trying to get identified people that you'd give ratings, 1, 2, 3, 4, in terms of the strength of their commitment. We'd also reach out to people on subject-matter issues, consumer advocates, tenants'-rights people, environmental people, labor people, identifying those constituencies and then working hard to get them enthusiastic.

Michael Aron: Tell me a little about the campaign of 1981. Once you won the primary and it was you against Tom Kean, how did it go? What's the story of that election?

Governor James Florio: Well, I've teased Tom over the years because I learned a lot from that campaign. One is that he went through the campaign at a very leisurely pace. I went through it at a manic way. I was getting up at 5:00 o'clock in the morning to go to plant gates. I'd be at the RCA plant gate at 6:00 o'clock to meet the first shift, passing out literature, and I'd have a campaign schedule of maybe 15 events through the course of the day. At the end of the day, we'd figure out how we'd have a campaign meeting at midnight so as to plan for the next day. I went from 172 to 156 pounds through the course of the campaign, and I looked like a cadaver because I just had run myself into the ground. And at the end of the campaign, it probably demonstrated-- I demonstrated that I was tired and just ran myself into the ground.

Michael Aron: Whereas he...?

Governor James Florio: He had two or three stops, maybe, a day, was always late for everything because he would talk with people, and that was a very smart way of doing things. Subsequently, I learned to do some of that.

Michael Aron: He was famous for not leaving an event on schedule but for sticking around and talking to every last person who wanted to--

Governor James Florio: And I was famous, or infamous, for being punctual to a fault, so I would be there when I was supposed to be there. He was never there when he was supposed to be there.

Michael Aron: I'm sure you and he debated on television, probably on NJN, probably beyond just NJN.

Governor James Florio: Well, the League of Women Voters were the people that really ran most of the events in those days.

Michael Aron: How did you do against him in debates?

Governor James Florio: Depends on your perspective. I mean, I thought of myself as sharp, perhaps overly sharp. I remember on a couple of occasions I was just condescendingly nice to him. Down in South Jersey, he mispronounced one of the roads that we have down there. He said he was coming down "Dilby" Drive, and I consciously got up and said, "Well, I've been on Delsea Drive on a number of occasions," and the whole audience erupted in laughter and whatever. So I was a little full of myself, but he was very good and he and I have talked about this over the years. It was the last truly civil campaign that was conducted, no negative ads, no negativity at all, and it was a pleasure. It was a good campaign.

Michael Aron: Do you remember who you used to make your commercials in that campaign?

Governor James Florio: There was a fellow, Joe White, if I recall, who was really a radio guy for the most part, but he was one of the people who was involved. There were no people in New Jersey at that point. We didn't have a whole lot of home-grown political consultants as we do now, so there were people out there. I remember talking with David Axelrod from Chicago, which is interesting. We didn't pick him, but--

Michael Aron: He must have been about 20 years old at that time. Do you remember Election Night?

Governor James Florio: I'm sorry?

Michael Aron: Do you remember Election Night?

Governor James Florio: I do, I do.

Michael Aron: Do you remember where you were?

Governor James Florio: I was in Cherry Hill at the Cherry Hill Inn, if I recall correctly. It was a long night. Obviously, nobody decided what the outcome was. Nobody called the election because it was just too close to call, and it took about a month for the recount to take place.

Michael Aron: What was that period like?

Governor James Florio: Sort of frozen in limbo because nobody knew what-- We had everyone working very hard and Angelo Genova is one of the people who was in charge of the recount for me in different counties.

Michael Aron: He would be put in charge of a recount today by a Democratic. He's sort of the top Democratic elections lawyer in the state.

Governor James Florio: He was a very young man, and I think in some respects, I might be responsible for his expertise in election recounts because that was when he first got involved in that sort of thing.

Michael Aron: I would imagine that was an excruciating experience waking up day after day after day and not knowing who had won the election.

Governor James Florio: Yeah, and in those days, we had paper ballots and a lot more counties than we do now, so the paper ballots had to be recounted and so on.

Michael Aron: Do you remember how it was that you decided, "Okay, it's time to concede"?

Governor James Florio: Well, when it was finally certified that the outcome was 1,797 votes short out of 2.5 million. I said, "Well, this is over. It's over." So I just conceded.

Michael Aron: Someone once said to me that as good as it feels to win in politics, it feels a thousand times worse to lose. Was that a hard pill to swallow personally, or not?

Governor James Florio: Well, I've always taken losses, and I've said I've lost on a couple of occasions as educational experiences, learning. I remember when I first lost in 1972 for Congress, I had my children with me at the headquarters, and they were all, as you would appreciate, very sad. On the way home, I sort of bucked them up a little bit saying, "Don't be concerned about this. It's a learning experience. You learn from your errors." And to this day, we've had conversations about how that taught them something about how to handle adversity. Because my responsibility in the losing effort is to try to comfort most of the other people who were very much intellectually and emotionally involved, so my job is not to cry. My job is to really help other people get through the difficulty of the evening.

Michael Aron: And was that the case in '81 as well, you had to buck some people up after it was all over?

Governor James Florio: Yeah, pretty much so. I mean, a lot of people invest a lot of time and energy, psychic energy as well. So people, I think losing candidates -- I think, at least I am -- are very conscious of that.

Michael Aron: How did you buck yourself up?

Governor James Florio: Well, I guess I've always bucked myself up in saying, "The best person doesn't always win," which is a little bit egotistical, but as long as I'm comfortable. As long as I'm comfortable with what I do in a campaign, that's all that really counts. I mean, I've had one occasion when I was uncomfortable. I let a consultant talk me into something that I still to this day regret, and it was a campaign ad that we run in 1989. We could talk about it if you'd like.

Michael Aron: I would like to get to that. Did the outcome in '81 feel legitimate to you? Did it feel like it was the honest choice?

Governor James Florio: The answer is yes. I mean, I had no reason to believe-- The only thing that was troubling was something called the Ballot Security Task Force. This was a conscious effort by the National Republican Committee with the concurrence of the State Committee to go hire off-duty policemen and sheriff's officers in uniform to go to urban polling places with armbands and signs on the wall warning people that if they voted inappropriately they could go to jail, and this was done consciously in minority communities, and I have no doubts that it may have influenced a number of people. After the election was over, the Democratic National Committee and the State Committee went to court and got a court order prohibiting that from ever happening again, and that order, by the way, stands to this day.

Michael Aron: And ironically, as I was driving here to do this interview this morning, there was a big discussion about voter suppression in the 2012 presidential race and whether some new rules on IDing voters amount to voter suppression.

Governor James Florio: Same type of thing. Well, I mean, frankly, I'm not being overly partisan. It just seems to me over the years the Democrats have always worked to be more inclusive in terms of elections and Republicans, some, seem to have the thought that they're better off if they can exclude people from voting.

Michael Aron: I've just got handed a list of who actually was involved in that '81 primary election. On the Republican side, in addition to Tom Kean, Pat Kramer, the mayor of Paterson--

Governor James Florio: He's become a good friend.

Michael Aron: Has he?

Governor James Florio: Yes. He was always a quasi-Democratic person anyway. He was the mayor of Paterson, very good guy, Irish humor, good sense of collegiality, and I've actually worked with him on a number of occasions over the years.

Michael Aron: Bo Sullivan, businessman?

Governor James Florio: Bo Sullivan I was introduced to in the campaign. Met him on a couple of occasions, seemed like a nice enough person, not politically particularly astute, but well-to-do, one of the first well-to-do people that used his own money, in many respects.

Michael Aron: On the Democratic side, Ken Gibson, did he run in '81?

Governor James Florio: He did.

Michael Aron: He did. Okay. Mayor of Newark?

Governor James Florio: Mayor of Newark, first African-American, very solid, solid person.

Michael Aron: Joe Merlino, whose name has come up already.

Governor James Florio: Yeah. Good friend. I worked closely with him. I don't know if he took me too terribly seriously at that point.

Michael Aron: As a rival?

Governor James Florio: Yeah. Joe was someone whose views were framed by Trenton politics, and I think he was just as naïve in '81 as I was in '77.

Michael Aron: To think that a Trenton politician could trump a congressman?

Governor James Florio: Well, we had a whole history of presidents of the Senate who wanted to run for governor, almost none of whom have ever been successful.

Michael Aron: Interesting. Well, here's one, Pat Dodd. I think he was president of the Senate at a certain point of time.

Governor James Florio: Yeah.

Michael Aron: Tommy Smith, the mayor of Jersey City. Did he run in '81 against you?

Governor James Florio: Yes. That was an interesting story. There was a fellow, a political person of questionable repute, John Nero was his name, the restaurateur, who supported Tommy Smith, very lucratively as the money would go in those

days. And Tommy had brought him down to Camden County and then ran his campaign, and I forget the exact numbers, but for all the money he put in, I think he got like 50 votes in Camden County. And the whole campaign with Mr. Nero was ethnic. I'm half Irish and half Italian, and so therefore he didn't think that was sufficiently full-blooded enough to command the Italian vote, and he ran a campaign ad in the newspaper that Florio doesn't like pasta in the way that he should, which of course is not true, but over and above that is somewhat irrelevant, I would think. So Tommy Smith had this fellow as his supporter and was fleeced by the fellow, because he sent the money down to get the votes and they didn't get the votes.

Michael Aron: Well, what was Tommy Smith's ethnicity?

Governor James Florio: I have no idea. His major claim to fame was he had a dog that appeared in his commercials. Henry Hudson was the name of the dog. And it was something. Tommy Smith and Henry Hudson were a team. They were going to do good things for New Jersey.

Michael Aron: Bill Hamilton is on the list.

Governor James Florio: Yeah, Bill Hamilton is good. Well, we got another president of the Senate, good guy, friend who's a reservist. He and I were co-reservists at the Naval Air Station in Lakehurst.

Michael Aron: But you beat them all.

Governor James Florio: Yes. Largely, in some respects, I think, because we were a little bit ahead of the curve in terms of what people expected out of candidates.

Michael Aron: How so?

Michael Aron: Well, again, the retail piece, reaching out to people, not expecting people to come to you, and people not being delivered by political organizations, understanding that ads in newspapers were something of a different time. I didn't spend a lot of money on television, but we spend a lot of money networking people as best we could through affinity groups, veterans, labor people, environmental people, ethnic groups. I had a large ethnic-- In Camden, we have a big Polish-American community, so I worked those organizations and they brought people to the polls for us.

Michael Aron: So Tom Kean becomes governor and he has a tough first year and then he shuffles his staff and the economy picks up greatly and by the time it's time for him to run for re-election in '85, he's pretty popular in New Jersey. And you sat out '85.

Governor James Florio: That's right.

Michael Aron: Because you thought he was unbeatable?

Governor James Florio: No, I don't even think it was that. I was just involved with much of the stuff I was doing in Washington, and I just didn't think it was time for me to run again that quickly. It's interesting. You mentioned about the campaign that Governor Kean ran. One of the interesting things is, I was challenged to take a no-new-tax pledge, and I refused to do it because I didn't think it was responsible. Tom -- and I tease him about this as well over the years -- not only took the no-new-tax pledge, he promised to cut taxes. And of course, they would point out the first two years he increased taxes fairly dramatically at the urging of Alan Karcher, who was the Democratic leader at that point for the most part. But it's interesting, the economy turned around and the last two years of Tom Kean's administration were just swelled with revenues.

Michael Aron: The last two years of his first term?

Governor James Florio: That's right. That's where he was able to do a whole lot of good things for teachers, education had money, and so on. So timing is everything in some respects. Can I see if I can get some water.

Michael Aron: Sure. Do you want to take a break?

Governor James Florio: No.

Michael Aron: So five Democrats lined up to run against Kean in '85, I think John Russo, Ken Gibson, Steve Wiley.

[NOTE: Six Democrats were in the 1985 primary including Essex County Executive Peter Shapiro, State Senators John Russo and Stephen Wiley, Newark Mayor Ken Gibson and Robert Del Tufo.]

Governor James Florio: John, John Degnan.

Michael Aron: No, Degnan ran for the nomination that you won. That was another one that could be on this list. Talk about Degnan. Did you have a relationship with him?

Governor James Florio: I did. Not a real relationship. I mean, I knew him. I was in the legislature when he was Attorney General when he was working in the campaign staff for Governor Byrne. Always got along very formally, nicely. I had a lot of respect for him. I think he had some respect for me. So we got along well.

Michael Aron: 1985, Ken Gibson, John Russo, Steve Wiley, Bob Del Tufo, and Peter Shapiro, I think, were the five. You say you got involved in issues in Washington, but you also must have been looking at the political winds and deciding this is not the--

Governor James Florio: I was. I mean, I was following it just interestingly, academically, intellectually, interested in what was going on, and I could see that the outcome was going to be preordained. Peter Shapiro, a very smart young man, also taught me the cultural differences in New Jersey. Peter is a very, very good candidate, very articulate, but then I remember going down with Peter down to Salem County, seeing very little rapport with the people in Salem County, Cumberland County, whatever, and I've come to appreciate the fact that there's a need for some complexity in the approach that you have going around New Jersey, because we're multiple states, multiple influences in terms of north and south, central--

Michael Aron: When you say the need for complexity, Peter Shapiro was a young, dynamic, Jewish Ivy Leaguer, sophisticated, yes--

Governor James Florio: And Salem County, the Democratic function in Salem County in those days, the big height of the year was going to the annual Muskrat Dinner, so you get a sense that maybe urbane sophistication might not play everywhere in the same way.

Michael Aron: How does one adjust oneself to that reality?

Governor James Florio: Well, first of all, you have to know the reality. You have to understand there are different ways you communicate with people. If you don't know that, and there's no reason why you should if you've been-- This is why the president of the Senate all don't succeed, because they're so wrapped up in the milieu of politics in the statehouse. They really get an opportunity to see the diversity of the state.

Michael Aron: You think your Congressman gets a better view of the complexity than a legislative leader?

Governor James Florio: Well, almost by definition, by definition you have a bigger constituency. But, again, it's the individuals. There are some individual Congressman who don't get it at all, and there are some who do.

Michael Aron: You say that you got involved in some other issues in the '80s. What was the focus of your work in Congress in the '80s?

Governor James Florio: Well, for the most part, it was defensive work, stopping bad things from happening. The administration came in. The first thing they did was to try to undo Superfund. The woman who was in charge of the EPA almost got herself impeached. The woman who was in charge of Superfund went to jail for conflicts of interest and perjury, things of that sort. So I was doing sort of battle for the common good against the forces of what I regarded as darkness. Most of the issues I was involved with had jurisdiction at that time over the Federal Trade Commission, so the anti-trust laws were not being enforced. You had more collaboration between business communities that were anti-competitive. I was

holding hearings, doing a whole bunch of things. The railroads were trying to be broken up. Amtrak was going to be privatized, broken up, so I was doing full-time work stopping bad things from happening.

Michael Aron: And were you assuming that there would come a day when you would run again for governor?

Governor James Florio: I don't think I planned it early on. I think I was doing what I was doing, getting to have more authority, beginning to get more things done. In some respects, although I enjoyed the affirmative years of the Carter administration getting things done positively, I also appreciated the fact that the work that I did defensively during the Reagan years was important as well.

Michael Aron: You mentioned that Alan Karcher became the de facto leader of the Democrats during the first Kean administration. What was your relationship with him?

Governor James Florio: Alan and I got along well. I think we respected each other. I used to tease him, as well, that there was no good idea, no brilliant idea that he could not carry to its illogical extreme. And he was a very smart person. We got along well. When I ran in 1989, you may recall that we had these Cheerios boxes that he called Florios, that they were squishy.

Michael Aron: Through and through!

Governor James Florio: One of the things that was nice after I got elected and did some of the hard things I did, he sent me a-- and I should have kept it -- a nice letter that was apologetic saying, "Commendable the things you've done, very commendable. You're not squishy. You're not a Florio."

Michael Aron: That's cute. I well-remember that cereal box. It was one of the cleverest little things in my 30 years of covering New Jersey politics.

Governor James Florio: That was clever. Alan was very creative and very, very-- way ahead of his time in terms of public policy.

Michael Aron: At some point, '87, '88, you said, "Okay, it's time again." Do you recall making that decision or do you recall what led you to do that?

Governor James Florio: I recall talking with people around the state asking them what they thought, and all of the people were very encouraging that I spoke with, and didn't appear to be a whole lot of primary opposition. In some respects, people were saying, "It's your time," and of course, there's never "your time" that you get by default. You have to work for it. But I got a lot of good reception, and really one of the most significant things was the environmental issues. This was a period of time, the late '80s, when beaches were closed. Literally, the Jersey Shore was closed as much as much as it was open because people were doing testing, people

were finding garbage washed up. As I said, medical wastes were being disposed of inappropriately, and the Jersey Shore, as you know, I think it's almost a matter of religion in New Jersey, and I was being heralded as someone that had environmental skills enough to be able to cope with that. And I started making representations that if I were to be a candidate and if I were elected, I would go, because I had the knowledge, I said, to be able to deal with the problems and clean up the Shore.

Michael Aron: I think in the Democratic primary in 1989 it was you and Alan Karcher and Barbara Sigmund, whose political lineage is pretty significant. She was the daughter of Hale Boggs, the House Majority Leader--

Governor James Florio: Very articulate, very articulate, very charming.

Michael Aron: Barbara Sigmund was, yes.

Governor James Florio: Articulate, and very charming.

Michael Aron: Her mother would then take the father's House seat, Lindy Boggs, and her sister, Cokie Roberts, journalist. That was an interesting field, the three of you.

Governor James Florio: Interesting, but not particularly competitive. I mean, in some respects, I didn't feel really threatened by the field, just because both people were very good, very intelligent, very articulate, but had no political organization of any sort, didn't raise a whole lot of money, so it was just not something. We were planning for the general before we probably should have been.

Michael Aron: Who were the key people around your campaign at that point? Was Joe Salema back with you?

Governor James Florio: Yes, but less so, less so. Doug Berman really was the person who was the campaign honcho, but we had a good campaign team of people.

Michael Aron: How did you know Doug Berman?

Governor James Florio: I just really ran into him. He was one of the Bradley people, and I guess I ran into him in that context, big supporter of Senator Bradley.

Michael Aron: So you had a pretty optimistic view of the primary in '89. You say you were already thinking about the general. There were five Republicans on the other side, Jim Courter, Chuck Hardwick, Bill Gormley, Cary Edwards, and was that the year Jim Walworth ran?

Governor James Florio: Yes, it was. Jim Walworth, right.

Michael Aron: Who were you planning for? Who did you think it would be?

Governor James Florio: I just evaluated all the candidates, and I really didn't plan for any. I didn't know who would be there. In some respects, most of the state legislators would have been much more conversant with state policies than Jim Courter as a congressman would have been, so I took that into account. But we were ready for whoever it is that got the nomination.

Michael Aron: That's an interesting point that you just raised that I want to take back to '81 for a second. Tom Kean had been a legislative leader, and I guess he had dropped out of the Legislature three or four years before he ran for governor in '81. But I guess you, too, had some Trenton legislative experience, but most of your experience up to that point had been in Congress. Did you feel yourself in any way at a disadvantage in terms of state issues?

Governor James Florio: No, because I consciously focused on those issues in addition to the things I was doing in Washington.

Michael Aron: That was your homework?

Governor James Florio: That was my homework, and I consciously worked to find the Jersey dimension of my national issues, so it was not wasted effort on behalf of the state.

Michael Aron: So jumping forward now eight years to the Republican field, some of those men, as you point out, were pretty well-versed in the state issues and you had to prepare yourself to go up against one of them -- Cary Edwards, for example -- in case that were... That might have put you at a little bit of a disadvantage?

Governor James Florio: Well, it would have made the race much more difficult. Cary Edwards, Gormley were very, very smart people, very knowledgeable, would have been probably more formidable.

Michael Aron: Hardwick knew those state issues.

Governor James Florio: Hardwick as well, very formidable. But, again, the difficulty they had was that they didn't have a statewide constituency, whereas I had, by virtue of running in the past, a statewide constituency.

Michael Aron: That used to be the rule of thumb in New Jersey politics that if you want to win a statewide election, you have to run once and lose.

Governor James Florio: Money now has taken the place of that. You can buy your statewide constituency intensely.

Michael Aron: Not only that, but it seems like losing once can sort of tarnish you, correct?

Governor James Florio: Perhaps, perhaps, yeah.

Michael Aron: Why do you think Courter won that primary?

Governor James Florio: I think because the rest of the people were fairly moderate and Jim presented himself as more conservative and that was the beginning of the process of the Republican Party in New Jersey becoming much more conservative-oriented when moderate became a term of some questionable attractiveness. So you had a number of moderate people. I think Chuck Hardwick was more the conservative of the others, but Jim Courter consciously worked at being perceived of as conservative.

Michael Aron: I have my memories of what happened after he won the primary, but I'm interested in yours, and if you don't remember mine, I'll throw them at you. He stumbled coming out of the gate, I think, as a--

Governor James Florio: On a number of occasions.

Michael Aron: On a number of occasions, yeah. Do you recall a particular stumble?

Governor James Florio: Well, the stumble was almost inherent in the political process on the Republican side. Well, he was naturally conservative, but to be successful in the Republican primary, they have to be very conservative. But then to be successful in the general election, you've got to be less conservative. Trying to flip, and, again, Governor Romney is going through this same process right now, it becomes difficult to do that. For example, on the gay rights' issues, you may recall that he was asked about gay rights and he stumbled on a number of occasions. Wanting to, obviously, be attractive to extreme conservative people, he was against that, but then when he wanted to be more moderate, he tried to be a little of each, and that didn't work.

Michael Aron: That is the one that I most well remember. It was-- the primary would have been in June. I think it was early July, and I remember a West State Street little press conference in which he said that he didn't think that homosexuals should be allowed to teach in the classroom, and the press corps, the statehouse press corps couldn't quite grasp what he was saying and kept pushing back on the statement to the point where Courter just turned and ran away from the press corps.

Governor James Florio: I remember that vividly.

Michael Aron: You do?

Governor James Florio: I do.

Michael Aron: So do I. I was there.

Governor James Florio: And I remember people coming to me, and, again, I guess this was not the norm, I said, "If a teacher teaches well, that's fine. I'm not threatened by somebody's sexuality. It's a private matter, and it's there." And they said, "Well, you don't want them to move into a house next door to you." I said, "If they're a good tenant, I don't care who lives next door to me, as long as they're a nice neighbor and a good tenant." And that was sort of contrasted. That was a fairly definitive answer, contrasted with no answer. Then, that same thing with a couple of other issues that we focused upon. I remember in one of the debates, one of the questions was about the environment, and Jim said, "Oh, yes, I'm strong on the environment." I sort of gratuitously sort of made a face, I guess, and said, "Give me a break. You just got rated by one of the environmental organizations as the worst environmental congressmen in the New Jersey delegation." And so I sort of ridiculed that a little bit.

Michael Aron: Was that the campaign in which your side pointed out a piece of land in South Jersey that had environmental problems and that he owned a piece of?

Governor James Florio: Yes. Well, that's the issue that I mentioned before that I was a little embarrassed by. Not so much that as the fact that we ran an ad which against my better judgment, I acquiesced to that had a picture of Congressman Courter. As he was talking about how he is good on the environment his nose started to grow a la Pinocchio.

Michael Aron: Ah, the Pinocchio ad.

Governor James Florio: When I saw that, I said, "This is not anything I'm comfortable with," and they persuaded me that it was something that was very effective. I said yes to it, but when I saw it on television, I told them to pull it down. I mean, it was just degrading the whole process.

Michael Aron: I remember traipsing across that property down in Ocean County or wherever it was that summer, and between the gay issue that -- he tried to retract what he had said or clarify or modify what he said -- between that and what your campaign called attention to with this piece of property that was contaminated, he looked like toast by Labor Day. Is that how you remember it?

Governor James Florio: I do. I mean, it was just an example that he wasn't conversant with the state issues and the whole idea of trying to square the circle of appealing to very conservative people in the primary and moderate people. He was just not adept at that. So he paid a price for that, I suspect, although over the years, he and I have talked on a number of occasions, and he went on to be very wealthy in the business section, so we sometimes talk about who really won and who really lost.

Michael Aron: Is he still with IDT in Newark?

Governor James Florio: I think he is, yes.

Michael Aron: He's not on the state scene anymore. You don't see him at events.

Governor James Florio: He's got into more productive things.

Michael Aron: Okay. Now that that campaign is percolating in my memory, I recall that I did lengthy interviews with both wives of the candidates. You had a new wife, Lucinda. When did you and she get married?

Governor James Florio: '88, 1988.

Michael Aron: '88. And his wife was Carmen Courter. Two lovely women who enhanced the men at their sides, I would say. How did Lucinda enjoy the '89 campaign?

Governor James Florio: Well, it was a whole new life for her. She was a teacher, an elementary school teacher, and so we got wrapped up in this fairly quickly and she was obviously a big asset going out with me and people said she warmed me up a little bit, which I really I suspect needed a little bit of. But it was an interesting thing. She's very, very good, made a nice presentation, talked about things that she was interested in, child literacy, education, things of that sort.

Michael Aron: What were September and October like that year? Just playing defense? Hold the lead?

Governor James Florio: No, we were fairly comfortable the way things were going, so we were just trying to maximize turnout, particularly in the urban areas, because what happened in 1981 was that notwithstanding Democrat versus Republican, the turnout was not that great in the urban areas. So we focused on the urban areas to get turnout, and the turnout was good.

Michael Aron: What did you do? You campaigned in the cities?

Governor James Florio: A lot of retail. A lot of retail.

Michael Aron: Doug Berman was the campaign manager. Who else was key in that campaign?

Governor James Florio: Well, there were a whole lot of people, many of the same people from '81 around. George Zoffinger was very much involved, Bob Del Tufo was involved, Angelo Genova. There were a whole lot of people who have become friends and supporters who were very actively involved.

Michael Aron: So you knew all fall you were going to win that election.

Governor James Florio: I'm sorry?

Michael Aron: You knew all fall that you were going to win that election.

Governor James Florio: Well, you never know, but, I mean, there's a comfort level that things are going well.

Michael Aron: Do you recall Election Night 1989?

Governor James Florio: I do.

Michael Aron: Where were you?

Governor James Florio: I think we were in New Brunswick, because the East Brunswick Ramada, whatever it was at that time, and it was a nice feeling.

Michael Aron: You had been preparing for that night for 15 years. It must have been a nice feeling.

Governor James Florio: Well, I mean, it was, obviously, a pleasant feeling, but I immediately started thinking about the job, signing the form, the transition team. It was actually a couple of days before we had started to have some talk to that.

Michael Aron: Before the election?

Governor James Florio: Yeah, before the election, general outlines of what we wanted to do, what we wanted to-- Carl Van Horn, who was somebody who was very helpful to me. Brenda Bacon was somebody who was very helpful to me on the substantive side, so I had already switched gears and was talking, thinking about how we were going to address the specific issues that we had to deal with.

End of August 6, 2012 interview with Governor James J. Florio