



# **Nevada Legislature Oral History Project**

**ANN O'CONNELL**  
**Republican**

**Senate, 1984 – 2004**

**MARCH 28, 2008**  
**LAS VEGAS, NEVADA**

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**THE O'CONNELL HOME**

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Interview conducted by  
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Get Consensus, LLC  
Under contract to the Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau

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The record copy of the interview transcript is printed on archival quality paper and on file with the Research Library of the Legislative Counsel Bureau in Carson City, Nevada.

## **PROJECT INTRODUCTION**

The 2007 Nevada Legislature approved an appropriation for a project of conducting oral histories with former state legislators, and in the summer following the conclusion of the session, the Research Division of the Legislative Counsel Bureau (LCB) conducted a competitive bid process to identify and obtain a contractor to carry out the project. A committee consisting of LCB and other state personnel with expertise in Nevada history and politics evaluated and ranked the proposals received. In January 2008, a contract was signed between LCB and Get Consensus, LLC, for an 18-month program.

Administered by Donald O. Williams, Research Director, and coordinated by Amber Joiner, Senior Research Analyst, the Nevada Legislature Oral History Project consists of video- and audio-taped interviews, which have been transcribed, edited for readability, and indexed. An initial list of suggested interview subjects had been presented to the Senate Committee on Finance when it considered Senate Bill 373, which proposed an appropriation for the creation of an oral history of the Nevada Legislature. Using that as the starting point, LCB staff considered several factors—such as age, length of legislative tenure, contributions to the State of Nevada, and whether a formal oral history of the individual had been published or was underway—when identifying the former legislators who would be interviewed. The final list provided to the contractor revealed a careful balance of legislative house, political party, and geographic distribution among the interviewees.

After LCB staff acquired the written permission of each subject, the contractor would proceed with scheduling the interview at a time and place convenient for the former legislator. Each interview was simultaneously filmed and audiotaped. The audio recording was transcribed verbatim and then edited by the contractor for readability. Each interviewed legislator was provided the opportunity to review his or her edited document, and any misstatements or errors in the videotape were corrected in the text. The contractor produced three copies of each final product, which includes the text and a DVD of the interview film. Copies were presented to LCB's Research Library and the State Library in Carson City; the subject legislator also received a copy of his or her interview. The repository of record for all digital film and audio files is LCB's Research Library.

Together, these interviews make a significant contribution to the annals of Nevada politics and provide incomparable context to the state's legislative history. The official legislative record outlines the chronology for actions taken by Nevada's lawmaking body; these oral histories vividly portray the background and circumstances in which such actions occurred. Invaluable for understanding Nevada's politics in the latter half of the twentieth century, these interviews present interesting explanations, entertaining stories, and thoughtful observations that might otherwise have been lost.



**Ann O'Connell**  
**March 28, 2008**

## ANN O'CONNELL

Ann O'Connell was first elected to the Nevada Senate in 1984. The Las Vegas Republican served in ten Regular and six Special Sessions, more than any other female legislator in Nevada history. During that time, she chaired the influential Senate Committee on Government Affairs in all but two sessions. She was a member of the Senate Committee on Taxation and the Senate Committee on Commerce and Labor during her entire legislative tenure, often serving as vice-chair, and chaired the Legislative Commission from 1999 through 2000.

Mrs. O'Connell was interviewed by Dana Bennett and Dale Erquiaga at her home in Las Vegas. Her dog, Buddy, occasionally joined in on the conversation, which includes some references to both interviewers having worked with Mrs. O'Connell during her Senate tenure. In this interview, the former Goldwater Girl thoughtfully reviews her involvement with politics, first as a businesswoman and then as an elected official. Encouraged to run after a long tenure in the shopping center industry and service with Citizens for Private Enterprise (a conservative political action committee), Mrs. O'Connell developed a 14-point process by which she analyzed legislation. She emphasizes the importance of studying bills and being educated on the issues, noting that a guiding philosophy is one of the most crucial things a legislator can have.

In this interview, Mrs. O'Connell comments on many of the legislative issues that were important to her, such as grandparents' rights, suicide prevention, homeowners' associations, eminent domain, the homestead exemption, and workers' compensation. She considers ethics and elections reforms to be among her chief accomplishments, and discusses, in depth, the tax fight in the 2003 session and the difficult election that followed and ultimately led to her defeat at the polls in a hotly contested Republican primary election. She reminisces about the many legislators, lobbyists, and staff with whom she worked on those issues. Mrs. O'Connell also describes the ways in which she shared information about issues and process with legislative staff and other legislators. She counts legislation that provides disclosure to taxpayers and voters among some of her more significant accomplishments. The Taxpayer Bill of Rights is one of those bills. Mrs. O'Connell's vibrant memories of her legislative experience shine through in this interview. She clearly enjoyed her tenure in the Nevada Legislature, which she believes was enriched by her husband Bob's enthusiastic support. She was inducted into the Nevada Senate Hall of Fame in 2005.

Born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Mrs. O'Connell attended the University of New Mexico and later received training through the International Council of Shopping Centers. She has two sons, Jeffery and Gray, and the family has lived in Las Vegas since 1968. She was long active with the Boulder Dam Council of the Boy Scouts of America, as well as the Nevada Retail Association, Secret Witness, and other organizations. Bob O'Connell died in 2004.

After the formal interview, Mrs. O'Connell reviewed some of her legislative photographs and memorabilia, which were filmed and included on the DVD that accompanies this transcript.

Dale Erquiaga  
May 2009

**[The first half of this interview was conducted by Dana Bennett; the second half was conducted by Dale Erquiaga.]**

**Dana Bennett:** Good afternoon, Senator O'Connell.

**Ann O'Connell:** It's so good to see both of you!

**Bennett:** We're going to talk about your legislative tenure today, so let's go back to the very beginning, thinking about the first day of the 1985 session. It was January 21, 1985, and you were a brand new Senator. What did you find when you walked into the Legislative Building that day?

**O'Connell:** The first thing I needed was a schematic just to get acclimated to where everything was, and it does take a while to find out. Of course, our offices were about the size of a broom closet. You could get a desk, and there was just enough room to open the door and to walk around the end of the desk and then be seated. Anytime anybody came in to talk to you about a bill or an issue, the door had to be left open so that the chair could fit in the doorway because there was not enough room for two people in that office. I didn't have a secretary or anything like that. There was a secretarial pool that was right down the hall, but there were five offices in the little alcove that we were in. Danny Thompson was in one. There were five little offices, and we were all kind of chucked in

there, kind of tucked away so nobody could find us. [chuckles] But it was great. It was very, very neat.

I had some exposure to the Legislature prior to being elected, but the most amazing thing to me was the whole gamut of issues that you cover. You're a little taken aback because you don't have a lot of hooks to hang all of that information on. Right away, you find out this is a real learning experience, and you have to be up to it. One of the thoughts going through my mind was that this is going to be an awesome opportunity for learning about things and, certainly, about the State.

**Bennett:** Why did you run for the Legislature in the first place, and why did you run for the Senate?

**O'Connell:** This was kind of interesting—long, but interesting. [chuckles] I was the president of an organization called Citizens for Private Enterprise. Before I got into all this, I was the Executive Director for the Boulevard Shopping Center Merchants Association. We were the only enclosed shopping center, really, in the state at that time, and we had 72 merchants. So we were kind of the pivotal point for retailers, mainly, in the area but also for a lot of business people. I started holding seminars on issues that we were interested in. Shoplifting was one of our biggest concerns at that time. We were

having so many problems with shoplifters. I got involved with forming a committee to go to the Legislature and to do something about our shoplifting laws. At that time, Bob List was the Attorney General, and we got an appointment with him and explained what a tremendous problem it was. It was in the *billions* of dollars even way back then. From that, it kind of spread out to other issues, mainly workers' comp. I was very involved and chairman of the Merchants Bureau of the Chamber of Commerce, and from all of this nucleus and networking of people, we formed this organization called Citizens for Private Enterprise. I became chairman of that.

Shelley Berkley, who is now Congresswoman Berkley, was in the Assembly, and she had decided that she was going to run for the Senate. Floyd Lamb was, at that time, holding Senate 5's seat. That's when they had that YOBO thing, and he got caught up in that. He couldn't run again because he was prosecuted. So Shelley had gone all out and was going to run for that seat. We were frantically looking for somebody to run against Shelley because she did not have a business background, and we didn't like the way that she had voted in the Assembly. We were right up to the deadline, almost, for filing, and we had been very diligent about trying to find some business person

*Shelley L. Berkley (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1982 to 1984. She has been in Congress since 1999.*

*Dubbed Operation YOBO, the 1981-1982 FBI undercover investigation into political corruption resulted in the convictions of two State Senators, two Clark County Commissioners, and a Reno City Councilman.*

who would run against Shelley for that seat. We were not having any luck at all. So we were sitting at this meeting in May, and Virgil Slate, a gentleman who owned all of the Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises at that time, was on the board. He said, "I don't know why we're going through all this when we've got a candidate right here who could run for this office." He said, "Ann, you could do this." And we all broke out laughing. We thought *huge joke*, especially me [chuckles] because I'd never even thought about this. He said, "I am very serious." He said that he had talked to people and could help me get started on money and that people would volunteer to help me. It was really an out-of-the-blue thing, and I said, "I don't know about this. I'm going to have to talk to Bob about it and think about it." I'm a person of very strong faith, and so I thought that I'll just pray about this and see what happens. Well, I could not get a clear, good feeling about it.

In the meantime, Virgil had people calling me and had people sending me money. Now you see what I'm saying, that this is a long story. Ned Day was one of the Channel 8 news people, and Hank Tester was on Channel 3. Both of them were very engaged in anything political. A gentleman by the name of Bob Brown, who was Mark Brown's father, was a

*Ann and Robert E. (Bob) O'Connell were married from 1977 until his death in 2004.*

very good friend of this business group, and he had a newspaper called *The Valley Times*. I had decided that this just wasn't the right time for me, and I really didn't want to do this. So I had sent back the money. One Saturday morning, I got up very early and wrote a little note and attached it to checks and said, "Thanks, but no thanks." The news came on, and Bob Brown had passed away in his sleep. On the following Sunday evening, both Ned Day and Hank Tester were doing a tribute to Bob Brown. When they had come to town, they had originally worked for him on his paper, and that's how they had kind of gotten the foot under the tent. They were doing an exposé on this race, on District 5's race, and they decided to tell everybody that it was rumored that I was going to run against Shelley Berkley. Just like the writing on the wall, I got the feeling that it was a good thing to do. So I was on the phone saying, "The check's in the mail, but send it back. I'm going to do this." [laughter] That's how I got involved. I was certainly not the perfect person on a poster saying, "Vote for this girl." I was the last-ditch effort to get somebody—a warm body—in that seat to run against Shelley. And that's how it happened.

**Bennett:** How did the campaign go then?

**O'Connell:** It went very well. Not having any idea of what I was doing, I took to the streets [chuckles] and

started walking. I don't know how we did it, but the good Lord took care of it, and we won it.

**Bennett:** Was the district as large then as it is now?

**O'Connell:** At that time, it was huge. I think we had about 60,000 registered voters in the district, and it went all the way over to Jones and Oakey and all the way out, almost, to Jean. Of course, there weren't a lot of homes out this way, but it took in quite a large geographical area, and 60,000 people in a Senate District, at that time, was a pretty large district. That's about the size of an Assembly District down here now. I think there are 120-some-odd-thousand registered voters in the district now, so it's doubled in size. But there were an awful lot of people.

**Bennett:** Was this the first campaign you had ever been involved in?

**O'Connell:** I was involved with Barry Goldwater's campaign.

**Bennett:** You were a Goldwater Girl?

**O'Connell:** I was a Goldwater Girl. That was the first campaign I was ever involved with. That's when he was running for President. I was involved and very active in school, running for student body president and chairman of the student council and things like that—cheerleader—but that was not anything I had ever been involved with as

far as a local office. So I'd never really run for anything like an office before. But it was a very pleasant experience, especially since I had no idea what I was doing or what I was getting involved in. [chuckles] And *never* did I think I'd be there for 20 years.

**Bennett:** How long did you think you would be there?

**O'Connell:** Probably until they found out how much I didn't know. [laughter]

**Bennett:** You mentioned there were a lot of issues you had to learn. How did you do that?

**O'Connell:** I was so worried about making the people look foolish who had supported me that I worked my little tail-feathers off. I did an awful lot of studying. I made sure that I read every bill. I would go back to the NRS [*Nevada Revised Statutes*], and I would look at the NRS to see exactly what the amendment we were making was doing to the law. If it was a new law, I tried to find out as much as I could about it. I decided that one of the best things to do was to set up points that I felt really strongly about. I think there were 14 of them. After I would hear both sides of the issue, I could see where this issue fit into those 14 points. I just really tried to do my homework, I guess is what I'm saying. Again, there's such a wide variety.

That particular year, we had had a situation with one of the lending institutes down

here, and they had gone bust. People were very, very angry, and they were all coming to the Commerce Committee at the Legislature, which I happened to sit on. We even had threats because they felt the State should back up the financial institution. They thought that each one of their accounts was insured for \$100,000 at that time. It was just overall insured for \$100,000, not individual accounts. People felt they had really been ripped off, which they had been. It was quite an interesting session and a big mess. We even had security following us around. That was kind of thrilling [chuckles] in itself.

But then we had another issue that was very, very interesting, and it had to do with outsiders being able to buy a bank here. There was just a little line—as there is in so many of our laws—that if you owned a thrift, you could buy the thrift company, and a thrift could then open a bank. This was put in by a gentleman who lived in Reno; I wish I could remember his name, but I can't. In doing my due diligence, one morning—I used to try and get there really early, before 7—I went down to ask the Legislative Counsel Bureau's fellow who was in charge of the legal portion. I said, "Am I reading this right? If a thrift were to buy the thrift, then they could open a bank here?" It was Zion from Utah who was trying to buy one of the

*In 1985, the head of the Legal Division was Frank W. Daykin.*

banks here. Sure enough, that little thing had gotten past most of us on the committee. So I went immediately to Dr. Robert Robinson who was chairing the committee, and I told him what Legal had said. Well, Robbie hadn't come across that. So it was a neat thing that we found that out. Then we could figure out why the little guy who owned the thrift and was planning on selling it to Zion was always in committee but had never testified. John Sande and Harvey Whittemore were representing the banks. So I met John and Harvey right away, and it was kind of a fun situation. That's what I did to try and learn what in the world I had gotten myself into.

*Dr. Robert E. (Bob) Robinson (D-Clark) served in the Senate from 1982 to 1986 He chaired Senate Commerce and Labor in 1985.*

**Bennett:** Do you remember your 14 points?

**O'Connell:** Not off the top of my head, no, I don't.

**Bennett:** You had them written out?

**O'Connell:** I had them written out. I still have them, yes. But I should have looked that up. [chuckles]

**Bennett:** Was there anyone who helped you learn the process or some of the rules that weren't necessarily written down as clearly?

**O'Connell:** I had a lot of mentors. People were very gracious to help. Senator Jim Gibson was always very helpful to me. He was of the opposite party, but we had sat on several boards together. We were both on the Boy Scout

Board, and there was another board that we had sat on. He was a good friend of my husband's. So he was very, very helpful. Senator Gibson, at that time, was—I mean, you kissed his ring and bowed to him. He was such a humble man, but everybody just had such a high regard for him that I really felt privileged that he would take the time to sit and talk to me about things. He gave me a lot of good information, especially on water issues because at that time the committee I chaired handled the water issues. So he filled me in on the Colorado River Commission and what the county commissioners had done.

The first year that I chaired Government Affairs—1987—was very interesting. I came across this bill that was probably 12 to 15 pages long, and I couldn't find any change in it. I thought, "What in the world?" because they were italicized so that you could easily pick up any change in language. After reading the darn thing two or three times, I found the only thing that had changed was a comma. So I went to Senator Gibson, and I said, "I don't understand this at all. What does this bill do?" So he got the bill out, and he said, "I remember this bill." He said, "I remember this issue." I told him that a comma was the only thing I could see changed. He said, "That was put in there, Ann, by a conference committee. Why don't you try

*James I. Gibson (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1958 to 1966 and in the Senate from 1966 until his demise in 1988. He chaired the Senate Committee on Government Affairs from 1975 to 1981 and was Senate Majority Leader from 1977 to 1985.*

and run down the conference committee and see what they have to say about it?" Keith Ashworth, Robbie Robinson, and Jean Ford happened to be the conference committee. Keith and Jean did not remember what had happened, but Robbie Robinson remembered it. It put the County in a position of being a policy vote on the Colorado River Commission instead of an advisory vote. So that gave the Clark County Commissioners a much stronger voice in what was happening with state water. When I found out what it was, I went back to Jim Gibson, and he said, "This is something I want you to promise me. Never, ever—as long as you have any ability to stop the Clark County Commissioners from having a stronghold on state water—*never* let that happen." He said that water should be in the hands of the State and that the County will do everything they can to get their hands on that water.

Interestingly enough, about two or three sessions later, Hal Smith wanted the water issues in his committee. Mark James had just been elected to the Senate; he's a water attorney, and he was going to help Hal on that committee. He was going to be the vice chairman of Natural Resources. We were in caucus, and we were talking about the water issues, and Hal asked to have that section of NRS because he knew a lot about the water

*Robert Hallock (Hal) Smith (R-Clark) served in the Senate from 1988 to 1994.*

*Mark A. James (R-Clark) served in the Senate from 1992 to 2002.*

things and thought he could really be helpful in this situation. I said, "You have to swear to me in front of the caucus that if I give you those sections of the NRS, you will not allow the County to have any more than an advisory position on that Colorado Commission. I promised Jim this, and I want to extract that promise from you." He made that promise to me, and I'll be darned if they didn't get it changed that very next session.

Jim Gibson was a very good friend of the state, and I respected him so much because he really believed in what was going to affect the whole state, not just in trying to protect his individual turf. That was a very important thing for me, too. That was something that I learned from him on many issues, not just the water issue.

When I was first elected—you had asked me about the first time I was there—I wanted to know where the master plan was, and I kept wondering when they were going to bring out the master plan to say what we wanted to be when we grow up as a state. They'd just kind of pat me on the head and smile and giggle about it, I guess. I never saw the master plan. I always felt that's something that is so dumb on our part that we don't have a goal we try to reach and that we don't look at legislation from a point of "is this is what we

want to be when we grow up?" Whether it's the business capital of the world or whether it's—I won't say gaming because that has just happened and not by accident, I will add. But I always felt that we ought to be looking at legislation to see if it is taking us closer to what this state wants to be known for. Certainly, it's more than strippers and prostitutes and drinking and gambling. But I never could get that through to anybody. [chuckles] They always just said, "Okay, Ann," and we'd kind of let it go at that. But I think that's a big mistake. I think that would have been grand, especially when we were a smaller state, if we did have some goals that we were trying to achieve through legislation.

**Bennett:** When you were chairing Government Affairs, which probably oversaw a larger variety of issues than most any other committee except Finance, did you have a master plan for what the committee would look at in terms of legislation?

**O'Connell:** I guess this goes back to a philosophy and if you have a *strong* philosophy when you're elected. I think that's a disadvantage for so many of our younger people because I don't know that they've lived long enough to really know what their philosophy is. I came from a family that was a business family, and I was raised by a single mother because my father

died when I was seven. So I always looked at things from a business perspective, and I always felt that we ought to be very pro-business. I have to laugh now because we've talked since I've lived here—and that's almost 40 years now—always about diversifying our economy, which was just a tee-hee thing that we never, ever really did. From my perspective, it was wanting to ensure that business is going to be strong here and that they're going to want to be able to diversify themselves and be able to expand their own business to two or three branches or whatever.

It was also to try and do something to help the smaller counties. It's like teaching them how to fish and not buying them the fish thing. They are so dependent on Clark County. I've always felt that was just absolutely not right. They had chosen to live in a smaller area for many different reasons, but they also ought to be able to sustain themselves. I have to smile when I think that in some of our counties, they don't even have more than one filling station, if they have one at all. What does that do to their economy as far as trying to fix their roads? There are just so many little things like that that people down here don't recognize. That's why I was always a great supporter of mining because mining would go into an area and would really help with schools or whatever.

They were a *good* community neighbor in doing something to benefit whatever small county that they were in. I always wanted to do something to encourage that.

So I guess I was very pro-business—still am very pro-business—and always felt that we needed to do everything to make us very desirable as far as our business attitude. When I was at the Boulevard Shopping Center, we constantly had people who would come in and want to take pictures of the shopping center because we had no gaming in it. We had no slot machines, and they wanted to go back and be able to show their corporate people that if they moved here, there were places that did not have slot machines and gaming. It could be a healthy family atmosphere. I guess that I realized that the outside world looking at us just really sees us as one street. I would have liked to have been able to do something about that.

**Bennett:** What are some of the issues that you championed?

**O'Connell:** Oh, golly—mainly things that made people aware of the taxes they were paying. We used to call them sunshine bills, so that when you received an insurance statement or an electric bill or a phone bill, that bill would identify how much in taxes you were paying. I always felt if people realized the taxes they were paying, the

more inquisitive they would be about where that money was going and how it was being used. So disclosure was always a big issue for me, and a lot of the bills that I sponsored had to do with disclosure, such as putting on the face of the bill whether or not it had a financial impact or was an appropriation that was part of the Governor's budget or if it was an outside appropriation. Many times, people don't read bills. That red light doesn't go on unless you do read the bill. So if we had it on the face of the bill, then it would be very helpful.

Anything to do with regulations was always a very big deal for me because I don't think that the majority of the population realizes that a regulation carries the same force of law. When I first got involved with that issue, it was from a mortgage company who had come to me with a complaint that they had had a hearing and that nothing had been done about the input they had given at the hearing. It was something the financial director wasn't even attending. He just had somebody from his staff there, and then the regulation went on through. Come to find out, they didn't have to take minutes of the meeting. They didn't have to record it. They didn't have to notify all the people who would be impacted by that regulation. There was no structure in place that provided due recourse for the public. They

*S.B. 140 (1989) makes various changes to the provisions governing meetings of public bodies.*

were just kind of stuffing that down their throats. I was able to do something about that by setting up a structure where you have to notify the people a regulation is going to impact, declare what kind of a financial impact it will have, and take minutes and a recording of the meeting. If a business did not or could not attend, they could at least purchase a recording of it, so they would know who had opposed, who had supported, or whatever. That was always a very big issue with me that I thought was not fair at that time.

Grandmothers' and granddaddies' rights became a big issue. Homeowners associations became a big issue because in my district there was the largest number of homeowner associations. Little domains were set up where people who were elected to a homeowners' board thought, all of a sudden, they had been elected king of something. We had a woman lose her home simply because something had happened with a homeowners' association rule, and she had not paid this penalty. It was a big court issue and a very, very critical situation. I became involved with homeowners along with Senator Mike Schneider, who also got involved with it, and we worked together on a number of homeowners' association issues.

Animals' rights—things to do with punishing people who abuse animals. Let's see;

*Michael A. (Mike) Schneider (D-Clark) has been in the Senate since 1996.*

what else? Before you got here, I made a list of issues that I worked on. I'll look at my list.

Auditing has always been a big issue for me because I know how helpful it is in business. It shows you the things you're doing wrong and things that you can be much more efficient on. We didn't have very strong laws for state agencies to be audited on a regular basis and to then follow through on whatever the law requested them to do. I found out a lot of interesting things through the auditing process. One was that the Attorney General's Office does not look at the intent of the legislation when regulations are being promulgated. If they are pressed to the point where they're trying to enforce a law, then they will see if there is a statement made on the floor of the house about this regulation. Now if you are silent on the floor and don't talk about it, then they have no idea what the intent was because they never go to the minutes of the committee. That astounded me. I don't know how many legislators realize that now. If you feel very strongly about something and you think something could be challenged in court, then you are obligated to stand up on the floor and talk about the Legislature's intent was in passing that because that's the only thing that's going to be looked at in court. Did you know that?

**Bennett:** I didn't.

**O'Connell:** I really feel like— [laughter] Knowing something that you didn't know! In case someone's watching this video who doesn't know, Dana used to work with me in Government Affairs. She was my research person and very, very helpful. A gem.

*Bennett was assigned to the Senate Committee on Government Affairs for the 1995 and 1997 Sessions.*

**Bennett:** It was fun!

**O'Connell:** At any rate, it's very necessary that you make that statement on the floor. So many times, the legislative intent is simply brushed aside and overlooked. So we tried to do something about that. It's always after the fact; it doesn't seem to be before the fact that we find these things out. Initially, when I put the bill in, it didn't go anywhere because they said it would cost too much. Then we had to set up something, the middle step— You back up from the first step, and sometimes you might have a bill in three or four times before you actually get it passed. But we finally got it to where the division has to audit themselves, and then the Legislature will pick five or six different agencies that they'll audit in a year. But they might not get back to that particular agency for another seven or eight years, so they don't have a way of following up. Then I insisted that we have a committee from the Legislative Commission that reviews all the audits that the Legislature does. Then when that agency is going to the Finance Committee for whatever they might need, the

Finance Committee will have a record of the audits they've gone through, and if the same problems are cropping up in all of that time, you know they haven't taken very seriously whatever the law was that you intended for them to adhere to. That's another thing that was a very important issue to me that we were able to do something about.

The Taxpayer Bill of Rights was a big bill for me that we finally got through so there would be due recourse, again, when the Tax Division was auditing a business. There was a structure set up for any challenge about anything and to send some helpful information prior to the audit being taken.

*S.B. 472 (1991) provides the Taxpayer Bill of Rights.*

Eminent domain was a big, big issue with me so that government can't just arbitrarily take your property and sell it to another person. Eminent domain is supposed to be for the good of the public and not to benefit some other private person. So that's something that I worked on a lot.

**Bennett:** What was some of your legislation that addressed eminent domain?

**O'Connell:** The first year I was in the Legislature, they really got a very strong eminent domain piece of legislation through, and it came through the City of Las Vegas. I had gone to Spike Wilson who also sat on the committee with me. I did

*Thomas R.C. (Spike) Wilson II served in the Senate from 1970 to 1986. Wilson and O'Connell were both on Senate Government Affairs in 1985.*

not like that piece of legislation, but I didn't know how to challenge it or if it really was as strong as I had a gut feeling that it was. Spike did not have any particular qualms about that piece of legislation, so he wasn't really giving me the information that I wanted him to give me. But the City was getting ready to do a big thing as far as expansion went, and they wanted some property. Of course, that was preventing this from happening. For years now, there's been a big case. The Pappas property was some of it. Senator Chic Hecht's property was some that the City just took. So that law was passed, and unfortunately, that was a stinkin' law that we let go through. What I tried to do with the eminent domain situation, first of all, was prohibit it—not let it happen. Of course, that failed many times.

In fact, there's a funny thing about that. We brought the committee down here to do a committee hearing on it, and my husband came to that committee and was opposing my bill! [laughter] That was very, very interesting, and the press got a big kick out of that. But he testified against the bill because he thought that eminent domain was a good thing for the public sector to have. I just thought it stunk, and I still do.

We got two bills passed, and the last bill was in concert with Barbara Buckley, if you

*Land owned by the Pappas Family was acquired by the Las Vegas Downtown Redevelopment Agency.*

*M. Jacob (Chic) Hecht (R-Clark) served in the Nevada Senate from 1966 to 1974 and in the U.S. Senate from 1983 to 1989. He passed away in 2006.*

can imagine two stranger personalities getting together on something. But I had a bill, and Barbara had a bill. We finally decided to collaborate on it, and we did get it passed. One of the things it did was prohibit a county government—or any government, not just county—from taking property and being able to resell it. There definitely had to be a clear and decisive reason for it. It had to be a blighted area. There were two or three criteria that kept government from just taking a good piece of property and doing away with it. At this time, the Fremont Experience was being put in, and there are a lot of souvenir shops along there that they wanted to get rid of. They knew they would get bigger tax dollars from a more productive thing than these little tourist shops that sold souvenirs. But it's not their blood, sweat, and tears that went into that little tourist shop. We tried to put in some very stiff criteria that determined whether a government would be able to even look at private property.

*Barbara E. Buckley (D-Clark) has served in the Assembly since 1994. In 2007, she became the first female Speaker in Nevada.*

**Bennett:** Over your 20 years, were there other issues where you and your husband were on opposite sides?

**O'Connell:** Oh, a great deal! [laughter] A great deal.

Going back to my list. Homestead exemption. Of course, I always liked updating that. Limiting courts' ability to levy or increase

taxes was another bill that I really worked hard on. I tried to get the state a commission that would review all mandates that were put upon us by the federal government. Of course, that went nowhere. But I thought it was a very good idea.

I was a big supporter of charter schools and school vouchers. I tried to do a lot for the home-schoolers. I always felt that those people are paying taxes and are paying for the schools, so they ought to have access to things that perhaps they can't provide in their home-schooling. Private schools, too. Whether it be gym, athletics, band, a science class, biology—just something that a person who is home-schooling wouldn't have the wherewithal to teach. That took a lot of work. Harvey Whittemore really helped me on that bill. His daughter wanted to finish high school early because she was going on to college, and she wanted to get a head start. She needed some classes that the school district was refusing to let her take because she went to a private school. So we were finally able to get that through Mr. Williams's committee, but not without a big fight.

Those are some of the things that I had a very big interest in and worked on.

*Wendell P. Williams (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1986 to 2004. He chaired the Assembly Committee on Education for five sessions.*

**Bennett:** With all of these people coming to you with ideas—you represented a large district and you chaired a large committee—how did you decide which bills to introduce and which ones not to?

**O'Connell:** For the most part, I would try to explain the process to a person who came to me and find out what other support they had for the bill. It can't just be an individual's idea because that ain't gonna feed the bulldog. You're going to have much more support. I would try to explain the whole process to them and to get commitments from them that they or their cohorts would be willing to come up and testify and would be willing to have a lot of support behind you to put the bill in. I tried to tell them that you might sell one person, but there are 62 other people who are going to have to make a commitment to this issue. You really do need to build your support, and when you can tell me that you've got that support, I'll certainly put the bill in for you.

In fact, that's how we finally got the suicide prevention bill. I don't have that on my list, and it should be because that was a very important thing to me. I don't know how many people realize that we have been, for years and years, either number one or number two on suicides. This was a constituent whose son had committed suicide, and she always felt she was

going to try to do something about preventing that tragedy from happening to another family. She came to me and told me how she felt and the tragedy that had befallen her family. We did a little investigating to find out how many different groups were trying to feed information to their constituency about it. There was no vehicle to network all of those groups. There was no information on suicide prevention and how to recognize different signs. For two different sessions, I think it was, we had an interim study committee trying to look at the successes of other states and gather just as much information as we could. We got a state structure. In fact, the little gal who came to me is now the coordinator for the state structure down here. She really deserves that job; she's just worked so hard. She understands the issue inside and out because she spent so much time doing a lot of investigating on her own. It was *amazing* to me in those hearings how many people—lobbyists and legislators—had all experienced a close family member who had committed suicide. Our First Lady's father committed suicide. Joyce Newman lost three members of her family. Assemblywoman Debbie Smith's family was affected. It was just amazing at the hearing. People you have known for ages but that issue had never come up. It was very satisfying to be able to accomplish

*Current First Lady Dawn Gibbons (R-Washoe) served in the Assembly in 1991 and from 1998 to 2004.*

*Joyce Newman was Executive Director of the Utility Shareholders Association of Nevada, Inc.*

*Debbie Smith (D-Washoe) served in the Assembly from 2000 to 2002 and began serving again in 2004.*

that to now have a state structure. We have a state hotline. Through that state structure, we have a support team that goes out to a family. A lot of good things came out of that. Again, that was a constituent who came to me and asked if there wasn't something we could do. I was never aware of the big problem here on suicide before she brought that to my attention. So that was neat.

But, again, you try to educate the individual as to what they're going to have to go through to see success in getting this thing through. The fact that we now have the ability, through the state offices, to telecast legislative hearings has been very helpful to folks who live in this area of the state.

**[Dale Erquiaga conducted the interview from this point.]**

**Erquiaga:** You served with three different Governors: Governor Bryan, Governor Miller, and Governor Guinn. Tell me about the men. How are they different? How are they the same?

*Richard H. Bryan (D) was Governor from 1983 to 1989.*

*Robert J. (Bob) Miller (D) was Lt. Governor from 1987 to 1991 and Governor until 1999.*

**O'Connell:** I've known each of them prior to them being Governor.

*Kenny C. Guinn (R) was Governor from 1999 to 2007.*

Governor Bryan used to have all of the new legislators come over and have lunch with him, just a one-on-one thing. One of the first things he asked me was what the most interesting thing was that I had discovered. This was about midway through the first session. I said,

“The most interesting thing is finding out how *smart* Dr. Robinson is.” He was the Chairman of Commerce at that time. I was amazed at Robbie because he just knew so much about every issue, and I thought how grand that would be to have all of this info. That was my answer to Governor Bryan.

Governor Bryan was very interesting. When I was at the shopping center, I used to hold breakfasts so that candidates could come in and meet all of the merchants and talk to them about their issues. So this one morning, Governor Bryan, who was then running for the Assembly, came in late. We were breaking up, and he was *livid*. In fact, we were sitting at a luncheon the other day, and I reminded him of that. He was so mad that he had the wrong time, and he missed that whole group of people he had an opportunity to talk to. But he was always very amiable, very nice. At the Legislature, I didn't have that much contact with him. Beforehand, when he was the Attorney General, prior to him running for Governor, there had been a misunderstanding with then-Governor List. Bryan was going to be running against List. At that time, my husband Bob was the president of Scouting, and he needed a speaker for the Scout thing. Because Carole Vilaro and I had lobbied against the tax shift when we went from the property tax to the

sales tax, List was very unhappy with me. But the point I'm making is that we invited Richard Bryan to speak to the Scouts and not Bob List. [laughter] So I think that Bryan always had kind of a soft spot in his heart for me for doing that, which was kind of a funny thing to look back on.

Miller and I didn't really have much contact at all, except in 1991 when he was Governor and we were working on the workers' comp bills. That's another thing that I was very, very much involved with. The State owned a billion dollars' worth of debt. We were almost a divided house—it was 11 to 10—and the Democrats were the majority. Jack Vergiels was then Chairman of Commerce, and he selected Randolph Townsend, Len Nevin, and myself to be the committee to find solutions for the problems that we were having with SIIS [State Industrial Insurance System]. We were working with the Governor's office as well. Boy, did we do an overhaul of workers' comp at that time. So that was my main association with Miller. I had known Bob, but not well. I was acquainted with him, but didn't really know him as well as I knew Bryan. We were updating him all along on that legislation. Golly, that thing had to be over 100 pages. It was a huge bill. We had really done an awful

*John M. (Jack) Vergiels  
(D-Clark) served in the  
Senate from 1984 to 1992.  
He was Senate Majority  
Leader in 1991.*

*Randolph J. Townsend  
(R-Washoe) began  
serving in the Senate in  
1982.*

*Leonard V. (Len) Nevin  
(D-Clark) served in the  
Senate from 1990 to 1994.*

lot of work on that. So that was my association with Miller.

Guinn. [laughter] Very interesting because we couldn't have disagreed more, especially on taxes. Lynn Hettrick and I had really worked on where we thought the budget should be cut. This would have been 2003. In 2001, after Guinn was first elected, it was very congenial. I was invited to most all of the little groups that we were working on, and so we had a very good relationship then. I was one of the big "standers-uppers" in cheering for his State of the State speech the first time around. The second time around, when he was proposing the very big budget, I sat there at the State of the State, which always happens about a week prior to the session opening, and I thought to myself—

Let's see if I can remember everything I thought to myself. There was no reason in God's green earth for us needing that kind of a billion-dollar tax increase. So I thought that this has to be about more than taxes. The more I got to thinking about this, the more I got to thinking that this is about gaming keeping control of the Nevada Legislature. So after we came out of that State of the State speech, I started asking people about what they thought and telling them that I thought that this isn't about taxes at all. I think this is about gaming trying

to keep control with this gross-receipts tax because that is the *worst* tax on earth that you could have. Nothing is taken into consideration about the impact that it has on somebody because everything is taxed prior to your paying bills and everything else. There were four states that had a tax similar to gross receipts; the pure gross receipts tax was in Washington State. The number of businesses that they had lost because of gross receipts was just astronomical, plus they had volumes of exception to that law. If it was such a great law, then why in the world didn't other states have it? So we just locked horns all through the session on that.

As I said, Lynn Hettrick called and asked me about the cuts I could see us being able to make. Lynn and I had about a dozen or so cuts. This was the most divisive issue in my 20 years at the Legislature. We were in caucus at about 10:00 one night, and Senator Raggio told the Tax Committee to go up and bring him back a tax bill that night, or we were going to have to go into a special session. So the Tax Committee, of which I was a member, went up, and we were reviewing all of the different scenarios again. The gross-receipts tax came up, and I made the motion to kill it. After we killed the gross-receipts tax—I got the votes to kill it—then the Tax Committee came up with a

*Lynn C. Hettrick (R-Douglas) served in the Assembly from 1992 to 2006. He was Co-Speaker in 1995.*

proposal of \$511 million of new taxes, which would really take care of the roll-over, which were the expenses that were already stated that had to be paid for. There are all kinds of fixed expenses. So we go back down and tell Raggio that we passed the bill. He didn't like the \$511 million, and that bill never got to the floor. The next morning, we come back into session, and he declares a Committee of the Whole. He usurped the power of the Tax Committee, and he started with the Committee of the Whole. They were going to get that gross-receipts tax if they possibly could. I always felt very badly for Mike McGinness who chaired the Tax Committee. It was a big insult to him to take the chairmanship away from him and do what they did.

Of course, that really started a division in the caucus. Even the Democrats were having a very difficult time with this, because the Democrats who sat on the Tax Committee felt they had been slapped in the face as well. From that point on, Guinn did not call me into any more meetings [laughter], to say the very least. There was a division not only on that issue, but it just permeated all of the other issues, and it became a very personal thing to where those of us who objected to going any higher than the \$500 million became ostracized from even the caucus meetings. We were not informed of the

*Joseph M. (Mike) McGinness (R-Churchill) began serving in the Senate in 1992.*

caucus meetings, and it was really ugly. There's no other word. It was mean. It was ugly. It was divisive. It was pretty bad. It really stunk! [laughter]

**Erquiaga:** You mentioned that gaming controlled the Legislature, and you mentioned lobbyists. Talk to me about gaming lobbyists during your 20 years.

**O'Connell:** For the most part, my relationship with gaming lobbyists has always been very, very good. Harvey was always very, very nice, very congenial. We spent an awful lot of time together, especially on the issue of Steve Wynn's sales tax exemption for art, which I never supported. But Harvey and I remained friends. I was always very friendly with John Sande. Those were the two very big, I guess, lobbyists for gaming.

**Erquiaga:** Who represented gaming when you first arrived?

**O'Connell:** Let's see. Who did? Well, I was pretty small potatoes. I don't think they ever expected me to be around for long. [chuckles] So I don't know if I can even remember who represented gaming— Oh, Jim Joyce! Yes. Jim and I were very good friends. We got along *very* well. But gaming never really supported me in a big way. My support mainly came from the Chamber— from people who were small-business people—

*Jim Joyce of Las Vegas was a fixture in Nevada politics and the hallways of the Legislature from 1973 until his sudden death in 1993.*

more than the big guys. But needless to say, they put a lot of money into my last race. [laughter]

**Erquiaga:** We'll talk about that, too. You've mentioned Senator Raggio a couple of times, and you served with him the entire 20 years that you were there. Tell me about Bill Raggio.

**O'Connell:** Bill Raggio is a dear, dear man. He's probably one of the most thoughtful men that I can ever remember having worked with, and, you know, at the shopping center, most of the managers I worked for were men. When my husband was ill, Bill called almost daily to find out how he was doing or what was going on. Very gracious. But don't cross him. [chuckles] When you have a different opinion than his opinion, then he can become very adversarial. He's really a typical male chauvinist, I guess, is one of the best ways to put it. He's two personalities to work with—just very, very thoughtful; very, very concerned about his group—but “father knows best” is his style of operating. I kept reminding him that every one of us was voted in the same way to get to the Legislature, and so I felt that my opinion is as important as his opinion. He never quite bought that. [laughter] I don't know why. But as a friend, I don't think you can have a better friend. As far as politics goes, we don't have the same philosophy.

*A Senator since 1972, William J. Raggio (R-Reno) was floor leader for the Republicans during O'Connell's tenure.*

**Erquiaga:** You were the first woman to chair Government Affairs and because of term limits in Nevada, you will be the longest-serving female Senator in state history.

**O'Connell:** I know. Not just in the Senate, but also the Assembly.

**Erquiaga:** Tell me about being a woman in that institution.

**O'Connell:** I think this really came from my mother because she was a single mom. She always had to work in a man's world as well, and she always earned respect. I think that's what you have to do. I never did like "women's issues" and "men's issues." That was never a thing for me. I always thought that what was good for one side would be equally as good for the other side. I think that you just have to prove yourself, especially in Nevada, because we have such a transient population. People have to find out if you're for real. So it really wasn't difficult for me. As I mentioned to Dana before, I just think you have to do your homework. People will listen to you if they think you know what you're talking about. So that was never an issue.

**Erquiaga:** You always served in the upper house. Tell me what it was like working with the Assembly.

**O'Connell:** Not always easy. I don't really know why. I think that the first time I really had a rapport

with the Assembly was through Lynn Hettrick. Lynn was the first person who really kind of crossed over and said, “Why don’t we work together?” He, Barbara Cegavske, and I used to have a meeting every Wednesday, I think, or maybe every Thursday. We reviewed everything that was coming over to each side and the issues and the background that we found out in the hearings, et cetera. That was not looked upon as being a user-friendly thing to do, which always surprised me because I really appreciated having the information.

When I first was chairing Government Affairs, Danny Thompson was the chairman on the other side, and he didn’t want to know anything. Forget establishing any kind of a working relationship. I don’t know if it was because I was not pro-union. I don’t know exactly what it was, but whatever it was, he loved to take shots at us—at me, specifically. Now Doug Bache was easy to work with. He really welcomed the opportunity. The reason I’m mentioning those two is because they chaired the same committee I did. So I got along fine with Doug, and he was interested in working together. But as far as the whole Assembly and our caucuses, it was Lynn who really wanted to work together. In fact, I even got to the point where I’d go over and sit in on some of their caucus meetings and talk to them

*Barbara K. Cegavske (R-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1996 to 2002 and began serving in the Senate in 2002.*

*Danny L. Thompson (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1980 to 1990. He chaired Assembly Government Affairs in 1987 and 1989.*

*Douglas Albert (Doug) Bache (D-Clark) served in the Assembly from 1990 to 2002 and chaired Assembly Government Affairs for four sessions.*

about things. So I can't answer for the other committee chairmen, but Doug Bache and I got along real well and tried to work together. We would always let each other know up front if there was something we couldn't support. We didn't know what it'd do in the committee, but we'd bring it up for a vote. I always thought that you should vote on everything. But again, I say that Lynn was the most congenial to work with. He would invite me to the caucus meetings to talk about whatever issues were happening in the Senate.

**Erquiaga:** What's it like to be a committee chair?

**O'Connell:** It's an awful lot of work! [laughter] You know this from everything you helped me with, especially on those election laws. I could not have gotten through those things without you, which I'm sure you know. But I always thought that because the Senate represented so many more people than the Assembly that we ought to be paid more. [laughter] I mean that in all sincerity because we had so many more constituents that we had to listen to and write to and respond to.

Being a chair really is a lot of work. I would have relished being in the minority party [laughter] many times because, as chair, you have to know the issues before you go into committee. Really, you like to know most of the answers so that whenever someone is

*Erquiaga was Chief Deputy Secretary of State from 1993 to 1999.*

talking to you about something, you know whether they're telling you the truth or not, to be very honest about it. I always did something that I thought was very helpful to staff. On Tuesdays, we always had lunch together—all of the secretaries and the research people and the fiscal people—and we talked about all the bills that we were going to be hearing that week and the next week, so that the secretaries would have some kind of information before they were hearing the bill. I thought that would help them to do much better minutes. Minutes were always extremely important to me. In fact, I was known, I guess, as a real pain because I would ask them to take verbatim minutes as much as possible because when you're going to stand up on the floor and try to convince other people to vote for this bill, you wanted to pretty much know what had taken place in the committee. So that was not an unusual request, but I do think that it helped the gals and guys—we had some men secretaries, too—to understand what they were going to be hearing. For those people who had been around more than one session, I think it was helpful to renew their memory of what had taken place. So being the chair was an awful lot of responsibility, especially when you had an awful lot of bills. The way that it's set up now, you have an influx of all the Assembly bills all at once.

Getting those things scheduled in my committee might have ended up being the committee that held up the session while they were hearing all of the bills on the floor. We would have about 200 bills that we would hear, and so it was not unusual for us to go to ten o'clock at night. I always called the meeting on Friday afternoon, too, which the committee *loved* because they were anxious to get home.

It's amazing what you learn at the Legislature. It's a *wonderful* educational experience—one you couldn't get anywhere else. From that standpoint, I loved it. And from the standpoint of the many, many people that I had the opportunity of working with, it was a wonderful experience.

**Erquiaga:** What do you think the public doesn't understand or has a misconception about its Legislature?

**O'Connell:** I don't think they understand anything about it. As you're going door-to-door, knocking, they don't know if you're running for a state office, a United States office, or a local office. They haven't compartmentalized those different forms of government. As I was sharing a few minutes ago, when a constituent would want a bill and I would explain the process to them, I don't think in my 20 years of experience that there was one person who knew all of the

hoops. They kind of thought that you introduced their bill, and then it was going to become a law. They didn't realize everything it has to go through—the steps it has to go through.

They also don't follow the Legislature. They'll read bits and pieces in the paper, but usually the paper will send reporters up there who are like us legislators, who don't have any hooks to hang information on. You feel sorry for them because a reporter might spend ten or fifteen minutes in one committee and have to run to another. The hearing that they left might go on for two more hours, but they only had a very brief explanation of the bill, so they're writing about that and not writing about everything that took place in the committee. Sometimes I'd read the paper and I'd wonder if it was the same committee meeting that I was in on. [chuckles] So the public's at a real disadvantage if they're depending on what they read in the paper for their information or on what they hear in sound-bites on the news. They don't have an opportunity to learn about the process unless they really go out of their way to become informed.

**Erquiaga:** How did the Legislature change in the 20 years you were there, if you compare 1985 with 2005?

**O'Connell:** Very, very different. The mean-spiritedness was not there early on. I don't know if it was because we were a smaller state and the money issues weren't as frantic. It's kind of hard to put my finger on, but we had a much more congenial atmosphere early on. I didn't really notice as much change until maybe 2001, 2003, where it really seemed to take on a whole different ambience, if you will. I think that one of the problems with our form of government is that we're always reactive. We're never proactive. That goes back to the "where's the plan?" idea.

I think Utah really has a much better system because here so much control or power is in the Finance Committee. All of the other committees make policy. The Finance Committee determines the budget. How can you really make policy without knowing the budget? So I think we've got it backwards. I always felt each committee should have the budgets for the departments that the committee oversees and that we ought to be doing both the budget and the policy, just like you would do in a business. That would make so much more sense. But, of course, it totally debunks the power of the Finance Committee, so you know how far that suggestion went. [chuckles] But it was always something that I thought we should do. A number of the legislators agreed with me but

would not stand up and say so. But I think that's a much more efficient way of doing business because we did have times where a policy had been made that could not be carried out until the Finance Committee would give the money for the budget to carry it out. The committee who had passed the bill to make the policy never knew, until well after the fact, that the Finance Committee never supported it and that the money was never there to carry out the policy. I thought, "Gee, this is dumb. [chuckles] Why, we're all adults here. Why don't we wake up and realize this isn't a way to run the State?" So that's something that I don't think was ever considered. It was brought up at every caucus meeting—I had the opportunity of bringing it up—but it never got legs. [laughter]

**Erquiaga:** How much is done in caucus versus what the public sees?

**O'Connell:** Bunches. I guess it's this way with every elected body. You talk about what is going on, who's going to benefit, and you have to vote against it but all of the rest of us will support it—you know, that kind of garbage. I'm sure that the people who are outside and writing about this suspect, but can't prove, it's going on. But an awful lot goes on in caucus. If something is very, very important to a legislator, then—redistricting is a very good example of that. The Congressional district was tailored to

Mark James who wanted to run for that Congressional seat, but then he backed out and Jon Porter stepped in. Interestingly enough, it hasn't quite worked out the way it was planned because I believe there are more Democrats than Republicans in that district now. So the best-laid plans don't always turn out to be the best-laid plans. But an awful lot goes on in caucus.

*Jon C. Porter, Sr., (R-Clark) served in the Senate from 1994 to 2002 and in the U.S. House of Representatives from 2003 to 2008.*

**Erquiaga:** What role does staff play? Did legislative staff change while you were there?

**O'Connell:** With term-limits, I think it's really going to change. Because I was there so long, I would get to know what the philosophy of staff was, but generally, they do not express opinions one way or the other. They're very, very good about that. You have to pose the right question to get an answer. The one thing that always bothered me about our Legal Division was that I think you could pretty much get any kind of an opinion that you wanted from them. I think we really saw that in 2003. But generally, the staff goes overboard to help you. They really do, and they'll pretty much get you any information that you are requesting. We're very fortunate to have such qualified people, I think, on our staff.

**Erquiaga:** What piece of legislation are you proudest of?

**O'Connell:** Do you know—I don't really know that. When I was looking at the list of stuff, there were so many things. I think the suicide prevention is a very important thing that we did because it affects so many lives. I think the auditing thing is very important for both government and business and also giving some criteria for the regulations because of the people that it affects. It's just kind of hard to pick a favorite because you look at how many people it impacts and if it really makes the state better.

Some of the 14 points I mentioned are coming back to mind right now. How does this affect families? Is this something that benefits a small group of people, or does it have a lasting effect on the state as a whole? Those kinds of things are things that I think are extremely important. Again, you want to do things that are going to help the state as a whole and not just thinking about a small agenda or a small group of people. So it kind of depends on the numbers that it's going to impact, I think, and the longevity of it. For instance, the shoplifting bill that we worked on is still the law that we have today. I wasn't in the Legislature then, but it is something that still affects every retailer or anybody who has to deal with shoplifting in the state. So that was a good bill.

**Erquiaga:** What are you least proud of?

**O'Connell:** That eminent domain bill [laughter] that happened the first session. Golly, that's a bad piece of law. You know how you get a gut feeling about something that you know is not good? I wish I had *never ever* supported that thing and did spend a lot of time afterwards trying to get rid of it and trying to put into place criteria that would limit it. But that is a terrible thing. You never know how people are going to use the law, also. That's something that is very hard to anticipate long-range. But that is a real stinkeroo! [laughter]

**Erquiaga:** Let me ask about your family. You served for a long time. What affect does legislative service have on a family?

**O'Connell:** My sons were already grown and away—not away; they live here—but were already grown and could've cared less about it. [chuckles] They never got involved with a campaign, so it never ever had any effect on them one way or the other. Bob is the one who really pushed me to keep running. He loved it. He was really the politician and not myself. He was a very good speaker. He used to speak at all kinds of things and could express his ideas very well. He hated going up to the Legislature because he doesn't like being somebody who watches. He wants to be a participant in whatever is going on, so that frustrated the life out of him [chuckles] when he wanted to be able to say something. But he

was always extremely proud of the fact that I stuck by my guns and really believed in something and would stand up for it. I just now wish that I hadn't been away from him so much. But he was the one who really encouraged me to run. As far as our family went, it didn't have any dramatic effect. But I look at the men who give up their time and money to be in the Legislature, and that is a sacrifice, much more so than for a woman whose family is grown.

**Erquiaga:** So you would go to Carson without Bob. Did you live up there alone, or did you have roommates?

**O'Connell:** No, I lived with Carole Vilardo. Carole and I go back to the legislation for shoplifting. Carole and I have been friends for about 35 years. She is the Executive Director for the Nevada Taxpayers Association. Her organization doesn't support or work against a candidate; they're only interested in tax policy and not necessarily pro or con. They just want the policy there. Carole and I lived together all the time I was in the Legislature and had a great time. I think she's one of maybe four people who *really* understand the tax structure. She's a great *wealth* of information.

**Erquiaga:** You mentioned gaming, and we got to talking a little bit about your departure from public

office. As we bring this to an end, tell me how it ended. You left office—

**O'Connell:** Well, I didn't leave office voluntarily. [chuckles] I was running again, and gaming got very provoked with me because of the gross receipts tax. They really wanted that tax, and they were very unhappy with me over it. When we went into the Committee of the Whole, we must have looked at 20 or more different scenarios of taxes. In fact, we were looking at so many that it got to where we had to number them and put the time of day on them because we could look at two or three in the morning, and we could look at two or three more before we ended that day. Without putting the date and the time on it, we didn't know which proposal it was.

In the course of doing all of this, I came off the floor one day and here was this group of lobbyists, two of whom were crying. I said, "Well, come on up to the office and tell me what's going on." They came up to the office, and we talked about the threats that they had gotten from some of the gaming lobbyists, and they said, "What are we going to do? They're going to stop all of our other bills on the other side if we don't support this. So what can we do?" I said, "I can tell you what we're going to do. We're going to put posters on our doors that say, 'Ask me if you want to know what

gaming has in store for you,” meaning that gaming wants the taxes on everybody else except them. So I did that. I put the poster on my door and got a few other legislators to put the poster on their doors, and gaming went berserk. [chuckles] They were very unhappy with me—very, very unhappy with me.

So they became a third party and spent literally about a million dollars to get rid of me. And they did. They were successful. But I'm very proud of the fact it took them that much money to get rid of me. [chuckles] But the lesson that you learn from all of this is that we are a company town. Unfortunately, it makes it very hard to be an independent voice for the people, which is not fair to the people.

**Erquiaga:** Looking back over the whole 20 years, sum it up for me.

**O'Connell:** It was a wonderful experience. Again, I loved the people. I loved all of the information that you were able to gain just by being there. You're like a sponge, if you're open to it. Government's always been fascinating to me. It's lovely to have had the experience. I wouldn't give it up for anything. Would I ever run again? Absolutely not. The major thing that I have really learned to respect and to enjoy is not having my time controlled. When you're in the Legislature, you get calls—in fact, I still get

calls from people who don't realize I'm not there any longer, which is kind of fun. [laughter] But it's an experience that you just couldn't have anywhere else, and you have an opportunity to meet wonderful people. It's an awful lot of work. The first thing I ask anybody who talks to me about running is, "Are you a self-starter?" You'd better be a self-starter because you're going to cheat the people who support you if you're not. You need to really have a heart for learning and for a lot of work because that's what it really means if you're doing the job right, that they're paying you to do.

I don't have any bad memories of it. I wish it hadn't ended the way that it ended, but it did, and so you just kind of move on. I've had some wonderful opportunities since then, so I don't think I regret a moment of it. My only regret—I shouldn't say that—my only regret is the separation, but who knew that Bob would die? But other than that, it was great experience. Lots of neat people. Lots of fun times as well.

**Erquiaga:** Thank you very much.

**O'Connell:** You're very welcome.

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**RELEASE FORM  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau**

I, Ann O'Connell hereby authorize Get Consensus, L.L.C. to  
(Interviewee) (Interviewer)

record my oral history for purposes of the Oral History Project of the Nevada Legislature conducted by Get Consensus pursuant to an Agreement between the Legislative Counsel Bureau (LCB) and Get Consensus, L.L.C., signed on January 10, 2008. I understand that the purpose of the Oral History Project is to collect digital audio tapes or video tapes, or both, and written transcripts of my interview. In addition, I understand that I may provide to the interviewer selected related documentary materials, including, without limitation, photographs, manuscripts and other memorabilia. I understand that the audio tapes, video tapes and written transcripts will be deposited and archived in the permanent collections of the Research Library of the LCB or transferred by the LCB to an appropriate entity within the State of Nevada for permanent storage as determined necessary by the LCB. I further understand that any documentary materials provided by me may, as determined necessary by the LCB, be deposited and archived in the permanent collections of the Research Library of the LCB, transferred by the LCB to an appropriate entity within the State of Nevada for permanent storage, or returned to me.

The audio tapes, video tapes, written transcripts and documentary materials produced as a result of my interview, may be used for research, scholarly and educational purposes and may be used by the Nevada Legislature and the LCB in public educational presentations, including, without limitation, books, audio or video documentaries, slide-tape presentations, exhibits, articles or presentations on the Internet or successor technologies. I agree that the LCB may use the audio tapes, video tapes, written transcripts and documentary materials produced as a result

of my interview to compile the oral histories of former Nevada Legislators and that such compilation may be made available for sale by the LCB. I further agree that the LCB may use my name, video or photographic image or likeness, statements, performance and voice reproduction, or other sound effects, for purposes relating to the Oral History Project without further approval on my part. I understand that when the material is used, proper acknowledgment regarding my contribution to the Oral History Project will be made.

By giving permission, I understand that I do not give up any copyright or performance rights that I may hold and that this permission does not preclude any use that I may want to make of the content of the information contained in these recordings. I do not give permission for my oral history and related materials to be used for purposes other than as specified in this Release Form without further written permission.

I herein warrant that I have not granted exclusive use of my oral history or related documentary materials to any other person. The only conditions which I place on the use of my oral history and related materials are as follows:

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Quinn O'Connell  
Signature of Interviewee

Feb. 12<sup>th</sup> 2008  
Date

Address: 7225 Montecito Cir  
Las Vegas, NV 89120

702-451-3444  
Phone Number



## Nevada Legislature Oral History Project Biographical Information Form

Full name: Aun D'Connell

Date of birth: 8-3-1934 Place of birth: Albuquerque, New Mexico

Parents: Aubrey Gray - Dorothy Nell Gray

Date of arrival in Nevada (if not native born): July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968

Spouse (name and date of marriage): Robert S. D'Connell  
Feb. 21<sup>st</sup>, 1977

Children: Jeff Champton Gray Champton

Religious affiliation: Christian

Education: High School - 2 yrs. College - Shopping  
Center Promotion Director

Military service: None

Year of first campaign for public office and title of office: 1984

Home address in your district at the time of legislative service: \_\_\_\_\_  
7225 Montecito Cir, Las Vegas, Nev

Occupation during legislative service: Hotel & Store owner

Activities and hobbies during legislative service: \_\_\_\_\_  
Please see enclosed - it's more than  
you need or want for sure! But might be useful  
to know before we meet. Back ground info I've  
put together for other occasions.





**Get  
Consensus**

GROUP FACILITATION  
COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING  
ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

## ***ABOUT THE PROJECT TEAM***

Get Consensus, LLC, is owned by Dale Erquiaga who serves as the project's manager and conducted some of the interviews. Dale is a native Nevadan with an extensive background in Nevada politics, having served as Director of the Nevada Department of Cultural Affairs and Chief Deputy Secretary of State. With both Nevada and Arizona clients, Get Consensus is based in Phoenix.

Dana Bennett is the project's leader and has conducted most of the interviews. Currently a PhD candidate in public history at Arizona State University with a particular interest in the women who served in the Nevada Legislature between 1919 and 1960, she has also conducted oral histories with former Arizona legislators. Prior to returning to school, she was part of the Nevada legislative process for many years.

Gwen Clancy is the project's award-winning videographer. Based in Reno, she hosts and produces the documentary series, "Exploring Nevada," which is seen on local TV throughout the state.

Jean Stoess transcribed and indexed the interviews. A long-time Reno resident, Jean is familiar with Nevada politics in both elected and appointed capacities and has indexed several Nevada history works.