

Kathleen Straus interview by Geri Zeldes

GZ: Okay, are we good?

Alright, we are going to start the interview, can I have your first and last name and please spell them, Ms. Straus.

KS: My name is Kathleen Straus (spells it). Just one S at the end.

And how old are you?

90.

And your title is?

I'm now a member of the state board of education, I was president for 12 years by I'm now, I'm finishing my 22nd year on the board.

So let's go ahead and start off with your background. Are you an immigrant or were your parents immigrants?

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So let's go ahead and start off with your background. Are you an immigrant or were your parents immigrants?

My mother was born in New York, in New York City. I was born in New York City. My dad was born in Austria. He came to this country as a baby. He was a New Yorker, actually he grew up in Newark, New Jersey. He went to law school in New York. That's how he met my mother. Her brother who took him home for dinner all the time, because I guess he had a room in a house in New York because his family was in Newark, and that was a big deal in those days, to travel between the new city. That's how he met my mother.

Okay. And where did you grow up? New York City?

New York City, I was born in my parents house which had been my grandparents house, where my mother grew up, in Harlem. And uh, she, I'm probably telling you more than you want to know. She had a tough pregnancy, and the doctor said she had to stop taking care of the big house and everybody in the family. She took care of her mother and her sisters husband died and she took care of her sisters three boys. She took care of everybody. The doctor said you have to take care of yourself, and we moved to, Bell Harbor in the Rockaways for four years. And then moved back to New York City and lived in an apartment in New York City on the West Side. And I grew up there and lived there until, in fact, we lived there after we got married because we had rented an apartment that wasn't built yet, because it was after the war and there weren't many places to move to until the new housing was built. So we lived with my parents so I lived there for probably the first 24 years of my life.

And you attended Hunter college?

Hunter College in New York.

And then you got married after you finished and you...

Well I went, after I graduated from College, I lived at home and uh, I taught for a year, and but I wanted to go away, I wanted to move, I wanted to go on my own, spread my wings so to speak so I moved to Washington DC and worked in Washington for a few years. Met my future husband in Washington. And uh, we didn't know that at the time, we both came back he lived in New Jersey and Lived in New York. And he got a job in New York and one thing led to another and we decided to get married and so that's how that happened he was an economist. He had gotten a masters. He had gone to the University of Chicago and got a master's at Columbia .

And uh, the first year of our marriage we were living with my parents and then our apartment was ready and we moved there. And then he was offered a job in Detroit, so we thought that would be adventurous. Move away, and in a way I was sorry to move away from my parents but uh, it seemed like a good thing to do at the time, so we moved here and we made a life here. A very good life.

When did you move here?

We moved here in 1952 and uh, we didn't know anybody. Only the people that hired him. They had rented an apartment for us down in the northwest part of Detroit. I thought when we came here it was like the suburbs because everybody was living in individual houses. In New York we

lived in apartments, and I thought all cities were like Detroit but they certainly weren't. Detroit seemed like the suburbs to me having all these houses. We had a nice apartment, garden apartment, with little bitty rooms. It was great. What I did was, so his friend, the wives of some of his friends were very nice, some of his colleagues I should say were nice and they wanted me to play majan. Well I had never played majaan and I decided this is not my cup of tea (laughs) so I looked up the league of women voters in the phonebook and called to see if there was going to be a meeting in my neighborhood. That was the start of my life in Detroit really. They were wonderful people that became very good friends and I got involved in the community right away.

So you started at the League of Women voters in 1952?

Yeah that was about probably in the fall in 1952. We moved here in July. There was an election and I was, I volunteered for Stevenson who was running for president at the time and stuffed envelopes. I had a cleaning lady once a week and when she came I had a little boy, my son was a year and half old at the time. So she came and I left and stuffed envelopes for a couple of hours (laughs) and then we used to have what they called millage campaigns for the schools because the schools had to raise property tax and uh, they had to get the approval of the voters to levy the tax which was called millage based on one mill, so uh, I volunteered for that and uh, the next thing I knew there was another one a year later I think or two years later. Then I was a captain. The minute you volunteer they get you back again. So that's how I met a lot of people and started working with the schools.

Why did you volunteer for Stevenson, what can you tell us about him?

Well first of all, I thought he was terrific. I loved the way he sounded, he talked. He talked to rationally. So, he cared for the people. He was concerned about people who needed help. And uh, I thought he would be very good. Apparently the people didn't agree with me. The voters, he got clobbered by Eisenhower. Who turned out to be a good president. But uh, my parents were both democrats and uh, I was a democrat too. So he was a democratic candidate and I thought he was very good. I was not a reluctant volunteer. I was happy to do it.

Tell us about some of the most memorable campaigns you worked on and how you felt about the candidates?

Well it was interesting, in the league, uh. We got involved with the campaign to call a constitutional convention for Michigan. That was the first real campaign i was involved in. At that time, I was on the board of the league. And uh, the league of women voters did not take positions on candidates but it took positions on issues. We had taken this position on one end of the constitution, and we campaigned for that. The first time we didn't get it and the second time we got it. and that was in 1960. The 60 election. And we went door to door. We knocked on doors and I can remember going. By that time I had a second child and uh, we went door to door with a baby. And uh, the little stroller. And it was interesting. It was an interesting experience. I met a lot of nice people and uh, got very involved in that. And went to sessions of the, constitutional event, we called it con-con. Saw how that worked. During the course of that, when it was, it was presented to the people to vote on. And the league took a position in support of the new constitution. The democratic party took a position against it. And I was campaigning for it and in the course of that, I got to know one of the delegates to the constitutional convention, I think he was the youngest delegate at the time. And there were a lot of coffee's, people had a lot of meetings in their homes. Small meetings around the community, we met that way. I was campaigning for it, he was campaigning against it. We became good friends. He later ran for the state legislature. He was the state rep, and then he ran for state senate, he was the state senator for a long time. And that was in 61', 61-63, with the convention. 63' was the election. And we became good friends and later, when was it? He was a senator, in 75, 1975 which was a long time later. He was chairman of the education committee of the senate. He asked me to do some work for the committee, and I did. And then he asked me to be the staff person for the committee, so from being opponents in this issue. I ended up becoming the staff director of the senate education committee when he was the chairman. His name is Jack <inaudible>. He was in the legislature for a long time and then he retired. We're still friends. But that was coming out of the constitutional convention from the league, opposite positions. He would come and pick me up and we'd go to the various places he was going to speak. He was on one side and I was on the other and he'd bring me home again. It was, that was a good experience.

Ideological differences....

And you, have uh, a long history then of campaigns. What has been your, aside from the constitutional convention campaign.....

The next one I got really involved in was the millage campaign, then I, let me think back, uh...trying to think, I worked the uh, in the 60's. Oh I remember, I was interested in the education. I had been a teacher for a year and I had majored in economics but my minor was

education and I was interested in it. And uh, there was a committee set up to uh, see if we should have a community college. And I was asked to be on the committee through my league of women voters activities. I did that and we recommended having a wayne county community college, and uh, there was a campaign to create the college and uh at the same time there was a campaign to authorize the college to establish the milage, the property tax rate and to elect the board for the community college. And I ran for the board. So that was an interesting experience. I was elected to the board, I got the most votes of anybody that was running. So that made me the chair of the board. The people authorized the college but voted down the tax. So there was no college. I couldn't operate without a revenue source. So uh, that was my first experience running for office. And it was very interesting. I went all around, wayne county, all places in Wayne county. I took my little girl with me most of the time and it was fascinating. We'd run into areas we were completely unfamiliar with. It was a real learning experience. You learn a lot about people's issues and the problems that they have. We went into depressed areas, including Grosse Pointe. It was the whole county. That was a very valuable experience. Even though...I didn't lose I won, but there was no college. The next year there was a campaign of renewing the milage for the city. Detroit public schools and uh, I was asked to in-between that I should go back, between that in 1961, I was president of the league. And Jerry Cavanaugh ran for mayor. I was president, I didn't campaign for him so I didn't do that, and I didn't know him. But when he was elected, I invited him to be the speaker at our annual meeting. And he came with his wife, and uh, he was charming, very bright guy. We got to know each other. And then the league had a position in support of revenue, equitable adequate revenue for governments. We took a position that was a state position and very quickly got a position on the city. Because the city then was in hot water then, they would get authorization to levy an income tax for the city. And the league took a position in favor of that, and one of my friends. One of my colleagues on the league board, testified for the league and Jerry Cavanaugh attributed the, the council approved it that the league had a big influence. It had a reputation at that time of being non-partisan, very careful. We did a lot of study before we took a position and all that so it had a good reputation. When he ran for re-election I was no longer president of the league. I had then did a program, gee I'm thinking of things I haven't thought of in a long time. I have to go back and remember. What we did was we put out a voters guide, we still do. We ask people questions and we print their answers. Just people read their answers and decide for themselves. And one of the TV stations wanted to know if we would do something, we did with the news, with the Detroit news. That was quite a, that was cool, they had never done that before. So uh, then the radio and TV station was owned by the news at that time. They asked us to do a candidates meeting on television. That was in 60, 65 I think. That election. And uh, that had a big influence on the outcome of the election too. But at that time, Jerry Cavanaugh had asked me to be the co-chair of his campaign committee for re-election. So I did that and I

got very involved in the campaign. That was my real first political campaign. When I ran for the community college it was very amateurish. It's not a lot of publicity for that kind of position. the campaign for Jerry Cavanaugh.

The Mayor of the city. I got to know a lot of people, very good friends. And uh, and then from that experience I was asked to run the millage campaign for the schools in the following year in '66. That was interesting too because the schools had always done it themselves within the school system. The people, the business community which was supplying the funding mostly, wanted it out of the schools. they wanted it separate, I had met these people in the course of the campaign for Cavanaugh. I did that and we won that election. At that time, the uh schools, my son was going to Mumford High school at the time, And it was on double session and it was so overcrowded. So this election was really important to get more revenue from the schools and to start maybe having a junior high school building one day to reduce the overcrowding. That was a very interesting experience and we won. I think that was the last millage campaign that was successful. It had been the first in a long time. That was in the city and I worked with some of the people that worked on the Cavanaugh campaign who did public relations and that kind of thing and they were very good. So that was in '66. And then in '67, uh, my husband died. And I had decided, my daughter was then 10. I thought well my husband wanted to start a business of his own and I thought I should go get a paying job so, because we took a big drop in income when he decided to start his own business. What we did was I started looking for a job and he was working on his business and it was really quite demanding. He had a heart attack and died. And then Jerry Cavanaugh called me and said, when you're ready, I'd like you to come and help me out. Which was a very nice way of offering me a job. So, that was very fortunate because I had not found one when I was looking. I didn't go to him, I wasn't asking him to get me a job or anything but i was very nice of him to do that. When I worked in Washington I had worked in the treasury department. When I went back to New York after the couple of years in Washington I worked in the Federal Reserve Bank in New York. so I had experience as an economic analyst. I worked in the department called the community renewal agency which actually was the research arm of the mayor's office. So I was qualified for the job but it was very nice of him to do that. So that's how I got into the workforce in Detroit and uh, and then he didn't run for re-election. '67 turned out to be a very difficult year. The uh, riots that occurred in '67', my husband died in '67 and uh, memorable year for not such happy occasions. So

Can you talk about the Detroit Riots?

Well yeah, we lived on uh, in north west Detroit. By that time we had a house, uh and I was on the commission on community relations. That's the one thing that mayor cavanaugh appointed

me to after his re-election because I had started, I had been president of the PTA and we started a community council in that area because we wanted to welcome African American people to come be in the school and to come to the community to keep it integrated. To have it integrated. And uh, that was the whole idea of the community council. So I was interested in doing that and the commissioner of community relations was a good fit for me at that at so that's what he appointed me to. That was not a full time job, paying job so when <inaudible> died, then I needed a paying job. And that's when he appointed me to the assistant director of this community renewal agency. So uh, I did that and then he decided not to run for re-election, he was devastated by the events of the riots. Uh, we were shocked, we probably shouldn't have been as shocked as we were. The year before there had been a disturbance on the east side over here some place, They handle that very carefully and very well and it was over, it didn't spread. But the one in 67 came after it was after Newark had had a big disturbance and uh, this one took off and it was interesting because my husband had had a stress test, he wasn't feeling well and he was in bed on Sunday when, and my son had gone to a meeting of a club, he was a member of a club, kids from Mumford. He was the only white kid in this club, and so the meeting was down someplace on linwood in the city and my husband was in bed, we were watching television. I was sitting on the bed with him and I got a call from a friend from Toronto. She was from Detroit but on vacation in Toronto. She said what's going on? I said nothing! She said what do you mean, nothing? There's a riot going on in Detroit. I said, where'd you get that from? there's no news, there's no nothing. She heard it in Canada.

Okay if you could go from your son was attending a meeting...

My son was attending a meeting of the club that he was a member of. The other members were all african american, negroes in those days. They said he should go home because there was trouble in the neighborhood. He came home and said it didn't look like a riot to me, it looked like a carnival. He said people were sitting in the street trying on shoes. And probably they were taking television sets and what not. So he came home and we got this call from my friend in Toronto. And then I got a call about the commission on community relations. They were going to have a special meeting the next morning to see what we could do. I was very concerned. I thought, I said "We haven't done our job right because if we had done our job right this wouldn't have happened," Well they didn't agree with me. They thought this was beyond our ,<inaudible>, I don't know if that's right or not. But anyway that was their position. So the next day my husband had to go back to the hospital and my son drove me down to the meeting and it was driving down the <inaudible> freeway. There was a movie called On the Beach in those days about a nuclear disaster and there were no people left. Well that's how it felt on the launch. We were the only vehicle on the launch. You could see smoke rising from various buildings that

had been torched. It was eerie. So that was, we had a commission meeting and I don't remember what we did anymore. I remember the surroundings better than the meeting. So then I volunteered to help feed people who had lost everything in the experience so and then they created new Detroit. The governor and the mayor who was Romney at the time was the governor. And Cavanaugh. And Lyndon Johnson was president. And they sent in national guard troops at the request of the governor so it was you know, there were tanks going down the launch and even there were even stores on Livernois, which was a very nice shopping street on those days, were going up in smoke so it was getting close to where we lived but nothing happened where we lived on Livernois. But there were churches and groups that helped organize support groups for the people who were displaced. Giving them housing and uh, and food really. So that was, that was quite an experience. And then, that was in July, and then in December, in November my husband died. That whole era was very difficult time to say the least. And uh, and as I said. After he died, the Cavanaugh came to the funeral and a couple of days later he called me up. So in January, I started working for the city. And uh, that was interesting too, I met people there that I'm still friendly with some of them that are still around. And uh, it was a good experience and then he didn't run again so uh I got a job with the South East Council of Governments. I had long been interested and had thought we should have regional governments of some kind to solve the problem. In those days Detroit had wanted to solve the problem. but in those days Detroit didn't want to be, wanted to be independent. It didn't want to be tied to the suburbs. And then after the, some of my friends said I shouldn't call it the riots it was a civil disturbance. But anyway, it was a regional planning agency so that was good experience too and at that time they had members of the local school districts as members. And i was the liaison of the local school districts. I wanted them to work more closely with the local municipal governments which i think they still should do but they were very independent and the really didn't want to do that. I was there and that was a frustrating, I did help in some places. They did do it but not as universally as I thought they should do it. Anyway, in 74, uh, I decided. Martha Griffiths was the congresswoman from the 17th district at that time and I thought it would be good to have another woman to succeed her. So I decided to run for the democratic nomination and uh it was interesting. I was very naive and I didn't have a really professional campaign like they do now and at that time the endorsement of the UAW was almost essential and I thought I had good relations with some of those folks from the campaigns I did before. They had a woman who was the vice president and she said we want someone who can win and you can't win. And I said if you endorse me I have a good chance of winning. They endorse another candidate. I walked out of her office and secretary said to me, well what happened. She said, huh, she said she wants women to get ahead but not of her. That secretary left her incidentally and went to work for a member of congress. But anyway, the person they endorsed won, he stayed in congress for a few terms and then resigned. that was interesting too, he

wanted to be a senator. By that time, Carl Levin had run for the senate and won and I guess he figured he wasn't going to get a chance to be a senator so he resigned, he didn't run for reelection. That's when it was re-apportioned. That's when Sandy Levin ran for it and got it. Anyway, that was another interesting experience.

So, let's see what happened after that. I had to resign from semcog, they didn't want me to be an employee when I ran so I resigned. So I needed another job and that's when Jack Faximum asked me to do a temporary study for him, which I did and then he asked me to be the staff director and then I worked in Lansing. I learned the legislative process and all of that. And then I worked for the senate for almost four years I guess and then the Michigan Association of school boards director of government relations got a job in Washington and they were looking for somebody. In the meantime I met someone of the legislative council of the state, they have a legislative services bureau, one of the <inaudible> I had worked with on drafting legislation had taken the job at the Michigan Association of School Boards, MASB. And she recommended me to the director and uh, I interviewed for the job and she offered it to me and there was, I think there was one woman at that time who was a lobbyist. That really was a lobbying job. So I thought well that will be interesting, never any women doing this, might be a woman lobbyist. So I, the way I saw the job was being a lobbyist for public education. So I thought that was a good thing, So I took that and I did that for the next 6 and a half, 7 years. I spent 10 years working in Washington, 10-11 years. Not Washington, Lansing. And learned the legislative process. Knew all the legislators at that time.

And the governor was William Milliken and then Blanchard. And uh, Milliken had appointed me, I was a democrat but I didn't in those jobs, I wasn't active as a democrat. Of course Milliken was republican. There was an organization called the education commission of the states. Which was started some years before that originally by the president of Harvard. James Conan. Who thought they should be in some way getting educators, professionals to work with policy makers and citizens. So there were seven people on the edge from each state. Including the governors member, and a couple of legislators and usually the superintendent of public instruction or the commissioner of education or whatever it happens to be and three citizens. And uh, Milligan appointed me as one of the citizen representatives. that's from the league of women voters, he knew me from the league of women voters. So that was an interesting experience too because I got to know governors from other states, including Bill Clinton, who was president. Every year the chairman of the education commission of the states in a governor. They alternate between a Democrat and a Republican. I met Bill Clinton, I met Chuck Robb who was the governor of Virginia and who was the husband of Linda... Linda..she was president Johnson's daughter. He became a senator after he was governor. I met a couple of other governors. Clinton made a big

impression on me at that time when he was governor of Arkansas. And Mrs. Clinton, Hillary. She had been a director of an education program in Arkansas. She came and she was a speaker. And he of course was a speaker. So that was interesting. All these things I do, one thing must have lead to the other and met all these people along the way.

Who's been your favorite politician?

That's a good question. Well I wouldn't say he's my favorite but Lyndon Johnson is very impressive.

So why was Lyndon Johnson impressive?

He was a very strong president but I don't know if you've read these books about him, they're fascinating. His whole life history and everything. He was a very effective president, but I guess not a really nice guy. So, hard to like him I think but he accomplished a tremendous amount and some of it was started by Kennedy. But he got it passed. He was a very, he had been a senate majority leader and he was very good working with the legislature, had a handle on that. Deal with them and make deals with them. Around the 50th anniversary of the civil rights act, this year because it was passed in 64, uh when he was in his first year as president, so that was very impressive. He had the war on poverty and the head start program was started, medicare was started. So he was very good at that but obviously he misjudged and mishandled the vietnam war and that's when there was a lot of student uprising, uprising is not the word, protests. Including my son going to Washington and sitting in the office of one of the senators from Michigan, Phil heart, who was a wonderful guy. In fact he was one of the people I admired most I think. He had a great deal of integrity. I admire Carl Levin I think he has a great deal of integrity. I didn't agree with him 100% but he was honest, he is honest. He's still here fortunately. He's very honest, he's very caring, a great deal of compassion. And was hardly respected by his colleagues in the senate and then he was the chairman of the, I don't know the name of the committee but the committee that did the investigation of government. But he held people's feet to the fire to make sure people we're doing a great job, not mis-spending money and not taking advantage of people and so on. I think I liked him and Phil Heart. Phil Hart was another wonderful public servant. in fact when they built a new senate building they named it after him in washington. And Debbie Stabenow is in the Hart Senate Office building. So he was very impressive.

Of course I like Jerry Cavanaugh. He was very smart, very you can brief him on something and he would talk about it like he had studied it for 10 years or something. Very good with people,

you know. Unfortunately the riots just, I wouldn't say destroyed him but he was so disappointed in that that could have happened and so troubled that that could have happened while he was mayor that he was very upset by that so. And didn't live very much after he was out of office. He died a fairly young man.

So, uh, and I like Obama (laughs). I like that he's cautious. He's criticized for his caution but I like that he wants to look at things from all angles and study things and not jump into something without knowing what he's doing. And I know he's got one problem after another but, I like his style. But not everybody does I guess. But I do and I appreciate that he's careful and doesn't say right away that we're going to go in and bomb everyone to smithereens or something. No matter what he does it's like dammed if he does and dammed if the doesn't but anyway uh, that's I'm trying to think, but I think Carl is a fairly good example of an honorable effective public servant.

I only have two more questions left. One question is what are some of your secrets to living a long life?

You know that old saying, if I knew I was going to live this long I would have taken better care of myself...(laughs).

One thing is I have a very happy childhood, which probably contributed to my positive outlook on life. I was, I was the longest, well I was nine years younger than my brother. And I was the youngest of my parents generation. My parents children's generation. So I had a lot of love in my life as a child. And I, I guess I thrived on that. They say love is the greatest thing and it was for me. And uh, I was fortunate when I moved to Detroit, of beating and making good friends and when I was faced with the death of my husband, my friends were wonderful. And very supportive and very helpful. And uh, that was also very fortunate, that contributed. I don't smoke, I've never smoked. Tried it when, in highschool we took a senior trip to Washington. Of course we were in a hotel where all the girls were smoking. I tried it and I hated it. I tried it again when I got home and I hated it again. I never smoked which probably contributed to my still being here. So, and I developed diabetes when I was, about 25 years ago. My mother had it. You can see I'm small, I was maybe 100 pounds at the time. I wasn't obese. Didn't fit the pattern. My brother too was very very thin, he was frail really. He got diabetes, other than that, that made me eat healthier. And of course the whole healthy eating now is much more common than when I was a kid. We used to eat a lot of red meat and cheese, a lot of stuff they tell you not to eat much of now. I dunno I guess having a lot of love in your family helps.

And my last question is, you have such a long list of accomplishments, which one is your favorite honor?

Well, I some of them are over there. One came out of the blue which was the, I've gotten life achievement awards from the defamation league and the American Jewish committee and uh the one that, I'm in the Women's hall of Fame, the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame. All of which mean a great deal to me. And then I got one from the Federal Bar Association, and I'm not a lawyer. When they called I thought they wanted my husband. But they said no, we want to talk to you. I got the Wayne McCree award for promoting social justice and that meant a great deal to me. I had worked, practically all my life in college, starting in College, in high school, in college. To make sure everyone was treated equally and uh, everybody should live together in harmony and respect each other. I did that for many years and to be recognized by an organization I had nothing to do with, that was very satisfying. That was, another interesting thing. The attorney general Eric Holder was a speaker for that and that was kind of exciting too. My daughter lived in Lincoln Nebraska and she came in for it, it was very nice. All those honors are really like icing on the cake. I didn't expect to get any of these things and uh, to be recognized like that was really very rewarding. Very, I got embarrassed because I thought, I shouldn't be getting all of this. So many other people have done so much to deserve these things. Here I was getting these recognitions. I kept saying I don't think I deserve this, but it was very nice. When I did it it was enjoyable.