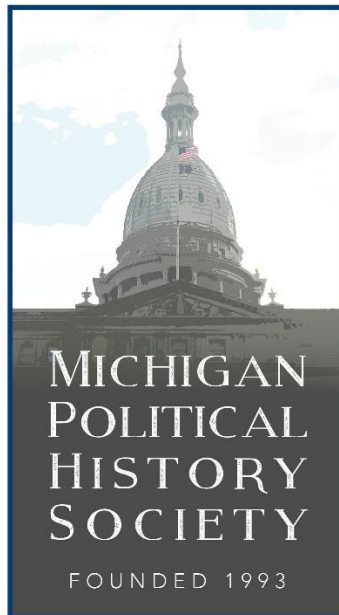


# **THE HONORABLE JOHN D. CHERRY, JR.**

**Interviewed Kyle Melinn**

**September 4, 2024**

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P.O. Box 4684  
East Lansing, MI 48826-4684**



Kyle Melinn: This conversation with former Lieutenant Governor John Cherry as part of the James J. Blanchard Living Library of Michigan Political History, a project of the Michigan Political History Society.

Lieutenant Governor John Cherry, it's a pleasure to be sitting with you here in the governor's office talking to you about your time in state government and a great history it is. And I can't help but think though, as we're taping this in the year 2024, your son, John Cherry, is a state senator, but he's not John Cherry III.

John Cherry Jr.: No.

Kyle Melinn: Please explain this.

John Cherry Jr.: Well, my wife did not want a third, so she said we're going to change the middle name. My middle name is Darrell, his became Daniel. So that's why he's not a junior or a third.

Kyle Melinn: And he doesn't use the D either. You use John D. Cherry Jr.

John Cherry Jr.: Well, I did in formal situations, but when I ran politically, my advertisement said, John Cherry. The ballot, you always put your legal name, John D. Cherry Jr. I would bet his legal name under the ballot's probably John D. Cherry, maybe not. But I ran as John Cherry as well.

Kyle Melinn: Now the Cherry legacy though, doesn't start necessarily in Michigan, does it?

John Cherry Jr.: No, it doesn't. It really starts in Texas. I was born in Texas, came into Michigan at a very early age. My dad was a native Texan, his father and his grandfather. His grandfather, my great-grandfather, was a justice of the peace in East Texas, an elected office. Of course, then in Texas, you only elected Democrats. It was a one party state, and his dad ultimately became the superintendent of schools in that same community. Of course, in a very rural Texas being superintendent schools may be that you were the teacher in a one class or one room schoolhouse. But so the politics was there, and ultimately my father was in telephone industry and wound up transferring up to Michigan. And over time when we settled in a community, Montrose, Michigan, he became a township supervisor there. So there's about three generations of politicians before I arrived on the scene.

Kyle Melinn: So how old were you when you all moved to Michigan?

John Cherry Jr.: I think it was about four. Yeah. So I mean, it was here at an early age.

Kyle Melinn: So he got involved in local politics as a township supervisor, how much you remember about his involvement in politics and what did you see at an early age that kind of got the fires started on you?

John Cherry Jr.: Well, I've always said one of the most difficult jobs in politics is township supervisor, because you're the person responsible for almost all types of law enforcement that occurs in a community. Even if you've got an employee who's doing it on your behalf, you still are the person that everybody appeals to. And so you put yourself all the time in very difficult situations. And see, I guess what I learned is I observed the kind of challenges that he faced and how he dealt with them. And I could sit back and say, well, geez, that worked, that didn't seem to work. And so you kind of learn in that respect. So I mean, it was observation. I was old enough. I think I was still in college while he was serving as a township supervisor.

Kyle Melinn: And what did mom do?

John Cherry Jr.: My mother, Lee, started out as just a homemaker, but at some point when kids got older and went to school, she went to work for Genesee County, but she also served on the city council after my dad left office. The place where they lived started out as a village and was in the township, and then it became the city, and she served on the city council.

Kyle Melinn: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

John Cherry Jr.: I had one brother and two sisters.

Kyle Melinn: Where do you fall in the hierarchy?

John Cherry Jr.: I was the oldest and my sister, who is the county treasurer in Genesee is the second. And my brother was a chief of police in one of the townships in Genesee County.

Kyle Melinn: Okay. Deb, the treasurer in Genesee County?

John Cherry Jr.: Right, right. Yep.

Kyle Melinn: So let's talk about when you went to school, University of Michigan. You didn't have designs to run for public office at that time, did you?

John Cherry Jr.: No, I really didn't. A couple things happened. One was I took a political science course, you have to have certain electives and you had to have something from the social sciences. And for some reason I picked this political science course. It was behavioral politics. And boy, I found it was terribly easy. I mean, just came natural. And then, so subsequently in the subsequent semester, there was a class in practical campaigns, a new class at U of M. And so my dad was running for office, others are running for office. So I said, I'll take that class and combine the opportunity to work in the campaign and get academic credit at the same time. So I got deeper and deeper involved to the point where I ran the campaign of a county commissioner running for state senate. That was Gary Corbin. And when Gary got elected, he asked me to join his staff as his chief of staff.

Kyle Melinn: Now up until that point, what did you go to college for? Did you have designs to be something in particular?

John Cherry Jr.: Initially I was thinking of going on a pre-med curriculum, but like I said, I got sidetracked pretty quick and things were a bit different then. I didn't find myself going to college with a career goal in mind. I mean, medical was one piece, and interestingly enough, my daughter ultimately has gone through and is now a medical doctor. So I mean, there must've been something in the family that had some interest there. But I just got sidetracked into politics pretty quick. I enjoyed college, but I'll tell you that I just found that I had a penchant understanding that made the subject matter interesting and easy to deal with.

Kyle Melinn: This was in the 1970s. So Watergate's going on. You must have been dialed into it. Had you always been a Democrat?

John Cherry Jr.: Well, yeah, I guess so. One of the things you learn in political science at that stage of the game is the thing that generally determines one's political alignment is the alignment of your parents and grandparents. And my dad was a Democrat. His parents, my mother's dad was a Democrat. I mean, her father was the president of Detroit Billing Trades at one point in time. So both sides of the family were politically active and politically active as Democrats. So it was almost a natural sort of thing.

Kyle Melinn: So what attracted you to Gary Corbin?

John Cherry Jr.: Well, Gary, as you said, it was the seventies. The war was a big debate. And Gary was the pastor of a church in Northern Genesee County in Clio, but he was also very active in the anti-war movement in Genesee County. And so the notion of developing an anti-war perspective out of Christianity was an intriguing thing. And Gary was an articulate person who seemed for me to be focused on the right things in life. And so that's just what the natural... And so I was involved in this county commission campaigns, and you begin to bond with people when you are working very hard with somebody on a project.

Kyle Melinn: So he was in the county commission, then he ran for the state Senate?

John Cherry Jr.: He did. And that was a product of redistricting. At that point in time... Well, I think what it was was the Watergate event, it gave Democrats an upper hand, and prior to '74, Republicans controlled the Michigan Senate. They lost control in '74. And it was primarily because of Watergate.

Kyle Melinn: And so the redistricting process happened, this would've been '71, the drawings, but the court stuff that kind of snowballed after that, '72. And then of course Watergate happens 1974. Democrats have a big wind at their back at that point. Gary Corbin runs as a Democrat then that year and is successful.

John Cherry Jr.: And you had to also, Kerry Kammer had to beat an incumbent Republican in Pontiac. Let's see Gary, and in Grand Rapids was John Otterbacher. So we had all this influx of new young Democrats into the caucus that was now in a majority.

Kyle Melinn: That's different because historically it has been difficult for Democrats to get a majority in the State Senate. Not necessarily in the State House, but in the State Senate, just because of the way that the population is. For Democrats, it's all very condensed so it's hard to draw districts where they can be successful. But that first term there, talk about working on staff there with Senator Corbin and a Democratic majority.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah, it was a caucus that was, as you say, not used to being a majority. So this is a whole new world with an influx of all new people. I mean, there were some new members that came over from the House, but there were also people who hadn't served in the legislature at all. So it was really a new town, and it was a young caucus, younger than what it had been.

For instance, the leader of the caucus was Bill Fitzgerald. He replaced his uncle, I believe, who was in his eighties, I think. And so Bill was a new face, a young face. You had a major generational change in combination with the change in the majority. So it was just a whole new sense of... It wasn't like there was a lot of institutional inertia that held people back. So it was an interesting time. A lot of new faces showed up on staff who ultimately became into different roles. Fritz Benson was new on staff, Mike Ranville, George Carr. I mean, these are all people that wound up in the lobbying corps and institutions now, but they were all new people. Dennis Muchmore, all new people that surfaced in '74.

Kyle Melinn: Somehow, Bill Milliken survived. Though, talk about why you think that he was able to be successful in that election in '74. And what was the working relationship with the Democratic caucus?

John Cherry Jr.: Bill Milliken had an ability to reach across the partisan aisle. He had developed, as a state senator, he came to the governorship as Lieutenant Governor, but previous to that, he had been a state senator. He had served with Coleman Young and as state senators, they developed a relationship that extended into their subsequent lives as the mayor of Detroit and as the governor of Michigan. And so Bill was able to utilize those kind of relationships to maybe fend off some of his democratic challengers. And he was just a good politician and he was a moderate. So he really kind of focused on the middle of the road, which Michigan tends to be there politically. And he kind of captured that and held it.

But he had a charisma that perhaps he wasn't known for that. But when you met him personally, you could feel it. I suspect that that too played part of the role is that people weren't really angry with Bill Milliken, and it wasn't until the PBB crisis where he kind of suffered some bruises, political bruises out of that. But before that, people tended to give him a lot of credibility. And I think that

kind of served him well in a very contentious partisan atmosphere, at least electorally partisan.

Kyle Melinn: So he was able to work with Democrats and get stuff done?

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah. And I think one of the people from Genesee County who has a long political history, Bobby Crim, who served as Speaker of the House, Bobby was notorious for his ability to work with Bill Milliken. I mean, they would come at things from different points of view, but in the end there'd be a solution because the two of them would figure out how to get there. And so probably two people of minds, at least in terms of the necessity to solve a problem. And I think that's what drove them. So I mean, he could reach out and work with the legislators from the other side.

Kyle Melinn: So how long did you work for Senator Corbin before going to AFSCME?

John Cherry Jr.: Oh, I think about around six years, I think. I think I left about 1980 and went to work for AFSCME about then. Worked for AFSCME about a year until the reapportionment occurred.

Kyle Melinn: And why did you go to AFSCME?

John Cherry Jr.: At the time, they were looking for Michigan political director. There was a brief time between graduating from college and running Gary Corbin's campaign where I worked for the county and was a local union president under AFSCME. So I had some relationships in AFSCME. And when they had an opening for the Michigan political director who happened to be at the time, Bob Emerson, a good personal friend, Bob left that to run for the House and serve in the House, I decided I would apply for the job and was fortunate enough to get hired.

Kyle Melinn: So before we start getting into elected politics, I imagine somewhere along the line you met Pam Faris?

John Cherry Jr.: I did.

Kyle Melinn: Yeah. Tell us about that.

John Cherry Jr.: Well, Pam was active politically in her own right. Her family, particularly her mother was heavily involved in Dale Kildee's campaigns. And so they were politically active. And so I would see her around Genesee County politics all the time. And so one time I decided to invite her to go to a fundraiser, and she said, "Sure, but I've already got my own ticket." So that worked out well. So that was nature. And so we started dating and found that our political compatibility went beyond just politics. It was personal as well.

Kyle Melinn: And when did you all get married?

John Cherry Jr.: I think that was '79.

Kyle Melinn: Okay.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah. Yeah.

Kyle Melinn: And where was she working at the time? Was she doing stuff for Kildee at that time?

John Cherry Jr.: She didn't work for Dale as an employee. She worked for Dale's campaigns as a volunteer. She worked at Fisher Body in Flint at that time, and at the same time was going to Mott Community College to become a paralegal tech. So she wound up ultimately going to work for the Genesee County Prosecutor's office there, both initially as a victim witness professional and then subsequently she became the jury coordinator in Genesee County.

Kyle Melinn: So we'll move now into the 1980s and the reapportionment of 1981, stretching to 1982, became a prolonged court battle, which had become kind of the way things went. But the Supreme Court went kind of a different way and appointed a state bureaucrat named Bernie Apol to draw the maps. And when he drew the maps for the state legislature, the State House looked completely different than what it previously looked like. 22 members had been drawn in together into the same districts, 30 brand new, completely brand new seats without an incumbent. And you got a phone call.

John Cherry Jr.: Right. I mean, initially, I think what made the change so dramatic was the court basically said that the apportionment process had to respect first and foremost boundaries of districts. And so that just changed... I mean boundaries were not the thing that drove redistricting in the past. So this changed the whole dynamic. And in the case of Genesee County, the one incumbent in the district, actually, there was nobody in the district I lived in, there was no incumbent legislator, Republican or Democrat, that lived there. It had been represented part of it by a Republican, Lauren Armbruster from Tuscola County, I believe. Joe Conroy had represented part of it. And Joe lived in Flint, and Joe was making a decision about running for either moving into that district or running for the Senate, and he chose to run for the Senate. And so there was just no natural incumbent legislator living in that district.

Of course, at the time I was working for AFSCME, I got a call from my friend Bob Emerson, who was serving in the House. He'd won an election, and Bob said, "Hey, look, this district in Northern Genesee County just was made for you. I mean, you live there, you grew up there. You should run for that seat." And I looked at it and said, yeah, I guess he's right.

Kyle Melinn: So just so we can visualize what it looked like, we're talking about Montrose, Mount Morris Township?

John Cherry Jr.: Flushing and Clio and Vienna Township, which is the Clio community. So four separate distinct communities. There was a smaller town off to the east that was Otisville, and there was Clayton Township below Flushing, but that was institutionally kind of a Flushing area. So those four areas, Gary Corbin had represented Flushing, and I had done a lot of work. I knew a lot of people in Flushing. I grew up in Montrose, I lived in Mount Morris. And as having worked for Gary, I knew many of the political players that lived there. There was also a lot of UAW members. And as working for Gary, I spent a lot of time working with a number of the UAW leadership. So it just seemed like a natural fit.

Kyle Melinn: And like you said, Bernie Apol's standards that then came out and was the standard for the '91 Reapportionment, 2001, 2011 is few county breaks. And so that's why everything was compacted in Genesee and really shied away from really breaking up even city or township boundaries if at all possible. So that's why it ended up kind of looking like a pistol shape almost.

John Cherry Jr.: Right, exactly. And I'm trying to think, so on the east side of Flint, something similar happened. The Northeast area, Tom Scott, he was the incumbent legislator there. I think Chuck Mueller was the incumbent legislator in the Southwest 'cause it extended over... Actually, it was Southern Genesee where Chuck was at. And then you had two districts in Flint, Bob Emerson, Floyd Clack, who had been a councilman, ran for an open seat in the north. The interesting thing about it was the first time that African-Americans had a district that really, they were the majority in. So it was the first time that they were able to have a African-American legislator from Flint, and that was Floyd Clack.

Kyle Melinn: So when Bob Emerson approaches you, said, "This district is made for you," you've said, "I guess it makes sense"?

John Cherry Jr.: Yep. Right.

Kyle Melinn: Okay. And how old were you at the time?

John Cherry Jr.: Oh, gosh. So that had been about-

Kyle Melinn: At around 30, 29?

John Cherry Jr.: '82, so I was 31. And so I said to my wife, "Geez, will you run the campaign?" She did. So I mean, she had a good style of understanding of campaigns and how you did it. And my dad at that point was retired, so he was helpful. I mean, he worked hard.

Kyle Melinn: And what were the positions you ran on? Because there were three specific things that you wanted to accomplish in that first-

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah, I always felt, and this was a reflection of watching other campaigns and being a legislative staffer that you had to say, why is it you want to serve? I



mean, what is it you're trying to accomplish? It's not good enough I just want to become the state senator and to accomplish. It's not good enough, "I just want to become the State Senator or the State House member." What is it you want to do? And I really thought there were three things in that area that were important to people that lived there.

One was there were a couple active landfills in the area, and the regulations of landfills were not very stringent at the time, and so people were concerned about what was happening in those areas. There was in fact a Superfund site outside the district and in the district. So there were environmental issues that were of concern to people.

Secondly, it was the outlying area of Genesee County. Because of how apportionment occurred in the past, most of the transportation investment in Genesee County occurred in the core, and there were some transportation issues in the outlying area that I felt needed to be addressed that had been ignored over time.

And then the final piece, I mean, there was a sizable retiree population in that area. Property tax had a significant impact on retirees, and many people were wondering, or at least struggling to keep a home that they had raised their family in that didn't want to desert at that point in time, but the property taxes had gone up dramatically. And so property taxes were an issue.

And so that really became the thing I expressed as the reason I wanted to become a state rep was to deal with those three issues and how they impacted our community.

Kyle Melinn: Talk about the field you ran against.

John Cherry Jr.: In the Democratic primary, there was a city council person from Flushing that ran, as young as I and maybe perhaps even a little younger, but he was a sitting city council person, so he was elected. The two population areas were Flushing and Mount Morris, and so the question is, who could win that? And I was hopeful that between Clio and Montrose, that would swing the balance, and it proved to be the case. And then in the general election was a builder from the Flushing area ran as a Republican, and the district was significantly Democratic. So I mean, he had an uphill climb there. The real battle was the primary.

Kyle Melinn: So your opponent was from Montrose, but you were in Clio, but you grew up in Montrose, so it's not like you didn't have any roots there or anything,

John Cherry Jr.: Right. Well, Gary Corbin was from Clio. He pastored the church in Clio. I didn't have the kind of connections in Clio that I had in Montrose, or even Mount Morris where I was living, but I had connections, and that helps. I mean, in the end, part of it starts with word-spreading about who the candidates are and who knows... I mean, you're always more comfortable with somebody who's

connected to your community than somebody who's not, and I was more connected to Clio than my opponent was.

Kyle Melinn: And so you show up to Lansing in 1983. What's the political climate in Lansing?

John Cherry Jr.: Well, we were changing speakers. Bobby Crim had been the Speaker in the Michigan House for a number of years. At least for six, I think. He was retiring, and so there was a battle for Speaker between Gary Owen and Joe Forbes. Joe represented Oakland County. Gary was from the Ypsilanti area. And so in some respects, as you mentioned before, the redistricting assured regardless of who had the majority, that there'd be a lot of new players in the legislature. So again, it was almost the Senate in '74. The House in '82 was new. I mean, there were some veterans, some real institutions like Dominic Jacobetti. And even though Gary Owen, who wound up as Speaker, was new in the job of Speaker, he had been an active member of the caucus for some time. And you had people like Mike Griffin and Jim O'Neill, Saginaw. So you had some veteran members that helped mentor people, but by and large, it was a new body and there were new issues that people wanted to address.

Kyle Melinn: And so as far as the election for Speaker, that's probably the first decision you had to make, right? Is it one of those situations, "Hey, congratulations. Who do you want to be as your Speaker?" Is that one of those things? Right off the bat, isn't it?

John Cherry Jr.: Right. Yeah. Exactly. And in the end, I guess I chose right. Well, in the end, it got resolved before Joe Forbes agreed to back off and become floor leader. But I think that's because Joe read the votes.

Kyle Melinn: He could count too. Right?

John Cherry Jr.: He could count.

Kyle Melinn: So what were the issues, then, that you started on during your time in the House?

John Cherry Jr.: Well, I asked Gary Owen to point me to the Natural Resources Committee, because I knew that if there was going to be any dealing with landfills, it would move to that committee. And that proved to be the case. Interestingly enough, there were three other Genesee County members on that committee. Tom Scott chaired it. Charlie Mueller was the ranking Republican on the committee, and we rewrote the Solid Waste Law in my first term. So I mean, it was an opportunity to deal with one of the three issues I thought was important.

Kyle Melinn: And so the main thrust of that was to try and limit the number of landfills, consolidate them, but with some strict environmental rules that had to be followed so that there wasn't leakage into groundwater and so forth.

John Cherry Jr.: Exactly. Making sure they had appropriate liners, that they were properly licensed, and that communities could levy tipping fees so that they could get some compensation for the nuisance factor of a landfill. So those things went into place. Another piece behind all of this was that the courts had basically said that solid waste was interstate commerce, which means Michigan could be a target for out-of-state waste. So we didn't want just a haphazard system where it was cheap to come in and just dump your trash. We wanted to make sure it was well regulated and that there was appropriate tipping fees occurring that would at least keep things at a more manageable level.

Kyle Melinn: And you worked with Charlie Mueller, as you said. He was from Lyndon. Owned an apple orchard, didn't he?

John Cherry Jr.: He did. Yeah. His dad had started the orchard, and Charlie owned the farm and operated it, but he'd been township clerk before he went to the legislature, so he was very active politically there, and still runs the orchard today, and his son is in the legislature.

Kyle Melinn: Well, and that's interesting you mentioned that, because your son and his son, both serving in the legislature at the same time, actually worked together on their own bipartisan legislation dealing with manufactured housing.

John Cherry Jr.: They did.

Kyle Melinn: And it's just interesting how the generations get back together.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah. Well, Charlie and I, we worked well together. Obviously, we're on the other side of a lot of debates, but we worked together on a number of things as well. Solid waste and other natural resources issues, we worked together on a number of them. Charlie says, "Your son's getting elected for the first time. Mine is. We should get them together, and at least they should get a chance to know each other before they go there." Because in the end, and particularly in this environment, if you can have someone from the other side who's least willing to stand up and say, "He or she's not all that bad. You need to stop and listen for a second," if you can do that, you might be able to accomplish some things together. And that's what it's turned out to be. My son's still a Democrat, Charlie's son's still a Republican, but they've found places, particularly as it benefits Genesee County, they can work together.

Kyle Melinn: And so you served in the State House then for two terms, and then 1986 rolls around and the Senate opportunity presents itself. Talk about that.

John Cherry Jr.: My mentor, the guy whose campaign I ran, State Senator Gary Corbin, decided he was retiring, which that seat then was going to be open, and my House district was clearly a significant part of that. My entire House district resided in that Senate district, which is a real advantage to have. And again, I had been politically active. My wife had been politically active. So we had connections out

that went beyond my House district, so that we were able to build a strong campaign, strong support in the other part of the district. I mean, the interesting thing you find about it is that it used to take me 15 minutes to go from one side of my district to the other. Now I found out it took me half an hour. So I mean, you say, "Oh, my gosh, that's a different thing." Then when you become Lieutenant Governor, you find out it takes several hours to go from one meeting to the next.

Kyle Melinn: So would you say that the Senate district made up, what, a third of Genesee County? Is that fair to say? Or more than that?

John Cherry Jr.: Actually about close to half.

Kyle Melinn: Okay.

John Cherry Jr.: I'm trying to think. At that time, basically, Joe Conroy and I had split Genesee County between the two of us. In subsequent districts, because of the shift in population, we had to go outside of Genesee County. And so in subsequent, I picked up some chunks of Oakland, but in that first time, we split it. All the city of Flint was in Joe Conroy's district because of the necessity to respect boundaries.

Kyle Melinn: And so by this time, 1987, Democrats are in a minority in the state Senate. How different was that going from a situation of being in a majority to serving on a minority caucus?

John Cherry Jr.: I mean, I had been in the House for four years. So in the context of pre-term limits, four years is still relatively low on the seniority list. So going from being one of 110 in the House to being one of 38 in the Senate, even if you're in the minority, you really have a bigger impact, even as a minority member of the Senate. And so while you're in the minority, I felt like I was in a better position than I had been as a low-seniority member of the majority party in the House.

Kyle Melinn: So what did you try and work on while you were in the minority?

John Cherry Jr.: Well, like I said, as a House member, we were pretty able to tackle the landfill piece. So I really focused initially on the transportation piece. What really focused my attention was a decision by MDOT to improve the shoulder of M-57, and one of my township officials in Vienna said, "That's foolish. Why are you improving the shoulder when you need to widen the road?" I mean, he was right. So that really became my focus is improving the M-57 corridor, and in that first term, four years, we were able to get a commitment out of MDOT to widen the overpass on M-57 and 75, which changed the whole dynamic in the Northern Genesee County, and then it was a matter of making sure other roads were respectable in the area. So I mean, my initial focus was really on that.

The other thing I had identified, I don't know if the Senate fiscal agency still does it, but at that time, they put out a document that really showed, by Senate district, what was your return in dollar spent by the state. And so I saw what my district was, and I says, "My goal needs to be is to up that significantly." And so we began focusing on... We had no state parks in that area. Like I said, most of the transportation money had gone towards the core of the county. There were other issues, educational spending. Mostly, the higher-ed institutions were in the core of the county. So I laid out a map of whether I could get additional investments into outer Genesee County that would enhance my position in relation to other Senate districts. So that first four years, that was really my focus.

Kyle Melinn: Just thinking back to this time here in 1983, we had the recall elections because of the income-tax vote. And James Blanchard had asked for an income-tax increase. The Senate obliged, but then John Engler led the recall against two members, and it had been Republican then for 40 years after that.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah.

Kyle Melinn: But I wanted to get your perspective on why you think just historically it's been so hard for Democrats to keep a majority in the state Senate, regardless of the maps or whatever is going on politically?

John Cherry Jr.: Well, it primarily is a function of the maps. There is the notion of gerrymandering. How do you split up a community in a way that you can utilize a concentration of votes to enhance your position in broader state map? Take a Flint for instance. If you are able to break up Flint five different ways, you can enhance the number of democratic districts in the out county. If you have to keep Flint together, you diminish the impact of the Democratic vote in the out county in some places. So one is straight gerrymandering of maps, and so the requirement that you protect boundary lines makes it more difficult to gerrymander. But then, on top of it, once the Republicans got the majority, they were able to work the maps. They had not only a majority in the Senate, but they had a majority of the court. And so they could work in conjunction with Republican members of the Supreme Court to make sure that they had favorable maps, and it really wasn't until the citizens chose to develop a nonpartisan apportionment commission that it broke that stranglehold.

Kyle Melinn: So we're going into the 1980s, and you had talked about transportation, took care of trash. The last big nut to crack was property taxes.

John Cherry Jr.: That's right.

Kyle Melinn: So let's talk about that, because that was an issue that was felt across the state of Michigan.

John Cherry Jr.: Right. Right. So Jim Blanchard had had a property... I mean, Jim recognized that property taxes were an issue, and he had a plan. And it escapes me at the moment how it was characterized as a nickel plan maybe, but it was characterized. And John Engler was smart enough to figure out how to exploit that. I mean, if it's a nickel, he could take a nickel. I mean, if it was a dime, nickel or quarter, he had some symbolic coin that could make it an issue. And John was arguing that the property tax was bigger than just a nickel. I mean, that's a pittance compared to what the problem is. And he used that to defeat Jim Blanchard. But by using it to defeat Jim Blanchard, it meant he had an obligation to produce a plan that wasn't a pittance, which many Democrats felt, well, okay, that's going to be his downfall, because there's no way you can have a dramatic property-tax plan without causing all sorts of havoc.

Kyle Melinn: So 1991, he's in office. 1992, he's in office. Nothing really gets done on this issue at all. And then we get up into July of 1993.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah. And he's got a plan in the legislature. And Democrats are caught here in the sense that they don't believe that the plan is really going to deliver any significant property-tax relief, but how in the heck do you vote against it? And as we caucused and talked about it, people were saying, "When I go home and talk about property taxes," people say, "I'd much rather pay increased sales tax than pay for pay property tax. Property tax is not fair, and it is driving me out of my home. At least I can control my sales tax piece because I spend money. I incur it by spending money. If I don't want to be taxed, I don't spend money, or if I am taxed by my income, well, then I can afford it better than a property tax. It doesn't make any sense."

So we said, "Well, okay, then perhaps we need to think about a significant change to either the sales tax or the income tax." The only way to force that was to eliminate the property tax as a source of funding education, because no one is going to let schools go under. And if we can succeed in eliminating the property tax as a source of educational funding, it will drive the debate in a way that will guarantee a more favorable, fairer system than we've got today. So we had an amendment that eliminated property taxes for funding schools.

Kyle Melinn: Just eliminated it altogether?

John Cherry Jr.: Just eliminated it.

Kyle Melinn: And so the front person of this was Debbie Stabenow, who was, at the time, exploring a run for governor in 1994. So she went ahead and made a statement and was the front person and was okay taking the slings and arrows from other Democrats.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah. I mean, a lot of the Democratic institutional players said, "What are you doing? Are you crazy?" I mean, MEA was a big supporter of Democrats at that time. I mean, that's teachers. You're limiting the funding of their jobs. What are

you up to? Not that we were able to satisfy them, but we said, "Look, the only way you're going to get change here is if you force change." And Debbie argued that. At times, she was a little fluxed that she was getting so many arrows coming in from the Democratic side, but in the end, that proved to be correct, that in fact, it did force the legislature to come up with a plan.

Kyle Melinn: And it was ingenious at the time, too, because Republicans couldn't necessarily vote against the amendment because they wanted to cut taxes.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah. And they thought, "Well, those Democrats, they're just playing a stupid little game. Let's call their bluff."

Kyle Melinn: Right.

John Cherry Jr.: Well, it wasn't a game that we were playing. We really did believe that the way you force this is to do this in the end. So in the end, they did support it and it passed overwhelmingly in the Senate, and the House could not ignore what we did. They faced the same thing, and they supported our movement there, and so when that adjournment came for the summer, there was going to be the prospect of no property tax to fund education.

Kyle Melinn: And there was a lot of indigestion among the school groups at that time. What are we going to do? So now it's up to the legislature in the fall of 1993 to come up with a solution so that the schools can be funded. And talk about your role in crafting what came out of this.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah, and there was a battle line being drawn between Republicans and Democrats, and the Republicans basically said, "We need to replace the property tax with the sales tax." Democrats say, "Well, it'd be fairer to do it with the income tax. Besides, the income tax, we can do that as a legislature. We can't do the sales tax, because the voters have to do that, and so it makes better sense for us to do the income tax. That divide, there really wasn't much challenge about how to do the property tax piece. It was all over what's the funding? What's the alternative revenue source? That went right up to Christmas Eve. At some point, the Republicans, John Engler and his Republican leadership in the Senate said, "This is not going to happen." Because we were hanging, the Democrats hanging tough and saying, "Look, it's got to be the income tax. We are not going to vote for this unless it's the income tax."

Kyle Melinn: You had a senator from the Republican side, Phil Arthurhultz, come up to you and basically tell you, "We can't do this."

John Cherry Jr.: "Can't do this." I said, "Phil, you're not trying hard enough." I said, "There's a way to do this if you want to do it." What we did in the end is we constructed a system that said that the revenue would be replaced by the income tax unless the public voted an increase in the sales tax, so both Democrats and Republicans got a piece of the solution. That's the nature of compromise. I

mean, in the end, you never get it all, but you try to figure out a path that you both can walk. That was the path that we came up with, so we constructed a ballot question that the public could choose. I mean, they knew that they were going to get their schools funded because there would be an increase in the income tax. That money would go to schools, and it would hold down property taxes, but if they preferred the sales tax, they could vote it in themselves. That's ultimately what they did, and that's what we have today.

Kyle Melinn: That was Proposal A.

John Cherry Jr.: Right.

Kyle Melinn: It took you all the way up till seven minutes after noon on Christmas Eve. What was that like being in the state Senate on Christmas Eve?

John Cherry Jr.: It was not fun, particularly when your family is back home waiting for you to show up.

Kyle Melinn: Had you gotten your Christmas shopping done at least?

John Cherry Jr.: Thank goodness. My wife had done most of it for me.

Kyle Melinn: Okay.

John Cherry Jr.: People were very tired, but people complain about the legislature waiting till the last minute to do something. That was clearly the classic example of it, but people will argue their point and argue their point and argue their point until you hit the deadline. Then people will begin to back off. I mean, it's just the nature of negotiations. You see the same thing happening in the labor, business community. Those negotiations go down to the wire. It's just the nature of human nature to strive and push for as much advantage as you can until the point where the decision has to be made, and that's what happened there. By and large, I think the public prefers the system they've got now much more than they did prior to that, so it worked. It caused a lot of pain, a lot of angst, a lot of argument, but in the end, it all bore out for the better.

Kyle Melinn: Eventually you became the Senate minority leader. Talk about how you got to that post, your ascension to become the leader of the caucus.

John Cherry Jr.: Well, initially in my second term, Mitch Irwin had been the floor leader for the Democrats, and Mitch had decided not to run again for the Senate. I put together an effort to replace Mitch that was successful, so I served as a floor leader for, gosh, probably close to six years, I think. Art Miller, who was our leader, had a heart attack, so was struggling health-wise, so at that point, we changed leadership. I became the caucus leader at that point.

Kyle Melinn: Was there any contention at that point?



John Cherry Jr.: A little bit, but not much. In the end. I mean, people knew that Art needed to slow down. It doesn't matter. Even if you're in the minority, it's a stressful job.

Kyle Melinn: One of the things I didn't quite realize about your tenure there as minority leader was to do something that all caucuses do now in 2024, which is move their political operations off-site. Talk about the decision to do that.

John Cherry Jr.: Well, it became increasingly apparent as people struggled, partisan struggles between one another and the kind of activities that was going on, that it was really inappropriate for us to depend upon our own legislative resources to help us get elected. I mean, there's always something about the job that gives you an advantage as an incumbent. I mean, you can't eliminate that, but the question of using Senate employees to campaign and to manage the political operation was questionable.

So, what we decided to do was go out and hire from the outside. We'd raise money. I mean, the money was political money, but we would use that money to hire somebody to run the political operation so that it wasn't Senate employees. They certainly could go on and do things on their own time, but they didn't need to be running. There's no way you can run a political operation on your own time. You've got to have someone dedicated to that, so we started doing that. I think now all the caucuses do that. I mean, there are other issues that come up, but at least it's not a question of whether you're using state resources to elect incumbent members of the legislature.

Kyle Melinn: It was close by. Do you remember the offices and what the staff looked like?

John Cherry Jr.: I can't remember. I can remember our office was to the north and west of the Capitol. There was a building with several offices, and we were in the basement of one of them. I can't remember the exact location, but it was clearly, I mean, we paid for the rent out of the campaign contributions. The staff was there were hired from the outside, so it was clearly distinguished from any kind of operation. Each caucus has their own policy teams and communication teams. So, I mean, those are caucus staffs, but by doing what we did, we removed those caucus staffs from the political operation.

Kyle Melinn: Then as far as accomplishments as the minority leader up to the year 2001, what would you say that you're most proud of?

John Cherry Jr.: Well, aside from the property tax piece, one of the things, John Engler and Democrats would fight. That was natural, but there was a piece of John that was fairly progressive, so I did find that occasionally if I could have a good idea, John would steal it. That would happen.

Kyle Melinn: Really? Tell me what happened.

John Cherry Jr.: One of them was the notion of a virtual. I called it a virtual university in which you could go online and get credit for college courses. Well, what John did was actually, he improved it. He stole it but improved it. It became an electronic version of high school. In other words, you could go. Michigan offered you an opportunity to take high school courses for credit virtually. I can't remember exactly what we called it at the time, but it was a virtual opportunity to take courses, and it was fairly successful.

Kyle Melinn: I thought they called it Virtual University.

John Cherry Jr.: Maybe they did, that was the term of it.

Kyle Melinn: I thought it was.

John Cherry Jr.: That all came, I can't remember how. I think the western governors had started something. So, I talked to Jackie Vaughn about introducing a bill and Jackie did it, but before long, Republicans introduced their own bill and ran with it, which was okay. I mean, the object was the end result, not who got credit. I think that's one thing I've learned in this whole process is the object here isn't to get credit. It's nice if you do, but the object is to get a resolution. If that involves somebody else getting the credit, that's absolutely fine.

Kyle Melinn: Now, we had talked earlier about Bill Milliken, and you mentioned his ability to work across the aisle was a reason for his success and his ability to get reelected. John Engler was elected three times to serve as governor. He wasn't necessarily known for his bipartisanship. How did he keep getting elected?

John Cherry Jr.: First of all, I mean, that property tax resolution didn't hurt John. I mean, he was governor when it happened. He ran saying it needed to happen, and it did happen. Even though it was a compromise and a bipartisan piece when it was all said and done, he was still governor. I mean, that's accomplishing something, and I think he got credit for that. John, while he was very partisan and had a sharp edge, when it got down to brass tacks, he could make a compromise too. He may not have left it with the goodwill that Bill Milliken did, but he could achieve it.

In the end, I mean, I think people generally felt that state government was generally well managed under John Engler. Now, every governor, I think starting with G. Mennen Williams, then George Romney, and even Bill Milliken and even John Engler at the end of their terms, were in a fiscal mess. It wasn't just because they had managed things. Michigan has these business cycles. When you're in the troth of that cycle, state revenues can get a little dicey, and when that happens, you might have a financial problem. That happened to John.

One thing I'm proud of as lieutenant governor, although I wasn't governor, that when Jennifer Granholm left office, she left with a surplus, and that had not been done during my lifetime. So I mean, of course, John didn't have to run

when that recession hit because he was termed out because of term limits having kicked in. For the most part, during his tenure of office, I think people thought that Michigan was fairly well managed. There may have been things happening, particularly at the early part they didn't like because I remember he got into the elimination of general assistants and people getting thrown off, and there was a big controversy.

Kyle Melinn: Tent cities on the Capitol lawn.

John Cherry Jr.: Oh, it was bad, but he grew beyond those. He found out he had to deal with those situations. So in the end, I think people thought at the latter part of his tenure, he was doing a decent job at running things, even if there were disagreements.

Kyle Melinn: So 2001 hits, and there's some discussion as to who is going to run on the Democratic side, and some names start emerging. We've got Bonior who's a congressman, Dave Bonior, and then we've got Jim Blanchard talking about coming back, but there's a new name on the scene, our Attorney General, Jenifer Granholm. Tell me your thoughts on her initially and her rise in politics.

John Cherry Jr.: Well, she was first of all, new face, as you say. That's an important piece. What had happened to the south of us, Indiana, we had a situation where I think a member of Congress, but clearly the son of a member of Congress, Evan Bayh, son of Birch Bayh who was a Democratic political institution in Indiana. Evan started out I believe as attorney general, became governor, built up a democratic institution in Indiana where the lieutenant governor and secretary of state, they were all Democrats. Evan had built that up. For me initially, I said, well, geez, the new face, attorney general. Perhaps maybe she would have a chance to replicate what Evan Bayh had done. She came out of Wayne County, out of the executive's administration. Ed McNamara was a significant democratic player then. She was his candidate, and that gave her an enormous advantage, I think.

Kyle Melinn: Pam liked her too, didn't she?

John Cherry Jr.: She did, and my wife was her coordinator in Genesee County. In fact, I was a Democratic leader, and in that capacity, I was responsible for raising money and helping elect other Senate Democrats. A major player in all of that was the UAW. They were there with Bonior, so I wasn't about to make a commitment on the gubernatorial race. I was going to focus on electing Democrats, but my wife, she was very active in the Granholm campaign. There was a fundraiser for Granholm in Genesee County close to the primary date, and I went to it.

Kyle Melinn: Had she picked you for running mate yet?

John Cherry Jr.: No, no. I went to it and there was a reporter from The New York Times there, and he asked me. He says, "Are you supporting the governor? I mean,

Granholt?" I said, "No, no, I'm not. I'm neutral in this race." He said, "Well, why are you here then?" I said, "My wife is the Genesee County coordinator." Subsequently, he put it in his newspaper article on the Granholt campaign that John Cherry, the Senate Democratic Leader, is as neutral as a beige couch in a white room. I had been selected, but I think post-primary, yeah, there may have been. I'm sure that pre-primary, there had been discussions in the Granholt campaign about prospective lieutenant governors and what was needed to help enhance the ticket. In the end, I think I brought things that they believed they needed.

Kyle Melinn: Well, they needed support from all of organized labor.

John Cherry Jr.: Right.

Kyle Melinn: You came from an organized labor standpoint. They wanted somebody with an outdoors background, hunting background. You're big into hunting.

John Cherry Jr.: Right, and it wasn't only just labor. It was UAW labor. They had been all out for Bonior. My legislative district both in the House and the Senate was in one of the major cores of UAW membership. I had not only had a strong labor background. I had a strong UAW support background, so I think that it helped mend that fence post-primary.

Kyle Melinn: Then another big thing was you had legislative experience because one of the knocks on her as she was going up against Dick Posthumus, the Republican, was she had no experience dealing with the legislature. You bring in somebody like yourself, that pretty much neutralized that discussion.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah. They kind of ignored, I mean, it was an issue that the Republicans were using a lot. It ignored the fact that she did have relationships with the legislature and proved as attorney general to be pretty adept at dealing with the legislature. I remember a good friend of mine, Mike Bishop, got at cross purposes with her in a hearing.

Kyle Melinn: When he asked her?

John Cherry Jr.: Are you an attorney?

Kyle Melinn: When she was the attorney general.

John Cherry Jr.: Attorney General, right. I'm sure that's one he'd take back, but the point is that she still needed it because it was being used against her. One of the things you always want to do is you want to take your biggest negative and figure out how you can turn it into a positive. So I think selecting somebody with legislative history helps. I mean, I wasn't the only one under consideration. Gary Peters was too, and Gary had a pretty decent. Gary was a very capable legislator, so I wasn't the only one that brought that to the table.

Kyle Melinn: Tell us about one of the first times that you met the governor and how she impressed you.

John Cherry Jr.: One of the things that will stick in my mind about Governor Granholm was the quality of her mind. I mean, after the election, we held meet and greets in four communities in Michigan. One of them was the Flint community. They entailed just being in the receiving line for two hours and allowing people to come through the receiving line, shake your hand, say hello, and you just would exchange pleasantries. Well, at Flint, the beginning of the line was five of my wife's aunts. My wife introduces her aunts to the governor, so we're there for two hours shaking all these hands. At the back of the line, at the end of the line are a number of my wife's cousins, and she begins to introduce them to the governor. The governor says, "Oh, you must be Josie's daughter. Oh, you must be Helen's son."

I'm saying to myself, how does she? First of all, she remembers the name of the aunts, and how does she make the connection? In my mind, you don't see that very often in life, and that told me that that was something extremely unique about her. I did find that as we worked together for eight years, that she just had a capacity for retaining information and using and working with it. So, she had a significant mind. I think probably that ability, she played a role there for Joe Biden when she played Sarah Palin in the debate prep. I would suspect that talent came right to the forefront during that, and that's why in the end, he turned to her and asked her to become Energy Secretary.

Kyle Melinn: So, when you and the governor met then, you all got elected. Do you remember what she told you about what your role was going to be and what she wanted you to do as lieutenant governor?

John Cherry Jr.: I reflect on it more as what she did to define the role. She wanted to have a morning staff meeting in which people presented the issues that would come forward in the day and have at least a short conversation about ways to deal with that. She always wanted me in that meeting, and they were meaningful discussions and they had an impact in how we proceeded. That told me that she really viewed it as a full partnership. Now, saying that, I mean, she was the governor. She knew she was the governor, and she knew she had to take responsibility for making the decision and being responsible for the decision. But nonetheless, she clearly valued the contribution that I could make in discussions and in actions.

In the end, when we got into the fiscal crisis we had, the last part, she was smart. She knew she couldn't do a tax increase in her first term, even though what we inherited was a significant deficit. We really struggled. If you remember, we went through an exercise where we went to several communities in Michigan and asked people. We presented to people the various options that you would have in trying to balance the budget and bring it into balance. People did that, and we used a lot of those suggestions in a way. I'll come back to that in a bit, but that got us through the first term, but the second

term required a income tax increase. In the end, I had to play a major role in working the legislature to make that happen.

Kyle Melinn: It is a great point that that first term and then the second term, it was all about the budget. On his way out the door, Governor Engler took all the rainy day savings that he could find to balance the budget and really left the cupboard bare for y'all.

John Cherry Jr.: The cupboard was bare. That's right. There were still challenges. Our education system needed support. I recall. I mean, one of the things from that exercise that stuck with me is the one thing people said constantly from community to community, group to group, is that we ought to cut higher education first. Now, higher education is one of the investments you need to make to secure your economic future, and they believed that that's where we should be cutting first. That told me, not that they were wrong necessarily, but that we needed to go out and convince people. If we were going to fund, the university-people. If we were going to fund universities at the level they needed in this state, we needed to convince people that it was important. You just don't say, "Oh, they're just wrong." You got to say, "Well, look, if we're right, we need to prove it." And so in the end, I was able to convince the governor to do a mission in higher education in which we laid out a long-term plan, but that was an outgrowth of that simply by saying... And that's the thing I think I learned as a legislator, is you don't dismiss what people say. Even if you think it's not right or it's misplaced, you don't dismiss it. You figure out how to deal with it.

Kyle Melinn: And that's where the Cherry Commission came from-

John Cherry Jr.: Right, exactly.

Kyle Melinn: And you went across the state and had numerous media appearances to try and explain the value of higher education and why we need to get more people into the pipeline.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah. And well, we set out some goals, like increasing the number of higher ed completions, so the number of degrees in the state, and those numbers have gone up. Up until then, higher ed was really being underfunded. And it's not the level higher ed wants it to be right now, but it's in much better shape than what it was back in 2005 or '06.

Kyle Melinn: So we're getting into now the second term, and the fiscal situation has gotten a lot worse. The budget hole now growing to one to \$2 billion and a tax increase is needed, but the Republicans, even though they don't have a majority in the state House, they do in the state Senate. And so talk about the role that you had in having to convince legislators, "Hey, look, we got to increase the income tax. It's the only way we can get out of this."

John Cherry Jr.: So you've got a Democratic House and just say Republican Senate. No way you're going to get any kind of tax increase, period, unless they both agree. Or at least, something comes out of both chambers.

Kyle Melinn: Right. They got to hold hands and jump together.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah, right. You got to put together the majority 20 votes in the Senate and you got to put 56 together in the House. Yeah, most of them are going to have to be Democrats in both chambers, but nonetheless, you've got to have Republicans to make it all happen, because you also got to get immediate effect, which requires a two-thirds vote in the Senate. So it's not just yeses on the bill. So I had to spend time, and she spent time working with Republican legislators on what kind of possible solutions would work here. What would make sense? What are people prepared to? We had a lot of conversations. In the end, we started to formulate a package, and then once we had a package, we had to begin to put votes together and amend the package. That's a long process that you can characterize as trying to convince people to do something they don't want to do. And-

Kyle Melinn: It wasn't just the income tax too, because there was a discussion as well to expand the sales tax, the services which had been talked about for years.

John Cherry Jr.: That's right.

Kyle Melinn: And now was the time to actually do something with that.

John Cherry Jr.: Right. And so we did wind up ultimately getting an agreement out of legislative leadership on a package that they thought they could put together the votes for, and we worked the House and got it passed in the House, and then got it passed in the Senate. It was difficult. As I recall, the Senate, I was presiding as the lieutenant governor presides over the Senate. It's not the first time. I can remember Bill Faust doing the same thing to Lieutenant Governor Brinkley, but when they had to do a tax increase to balance the budget, when Bill Milliken was governor and Bill Faust was the Senate Democratic leader, he made sure that the vote was a tie vote so lieutenant governor would have to cast a vote to break the tie. It was probably the thing that killed Lieutenant Governor Brinkley's gubernatorial campaign. And so that was part of the deal we worked out here, that there'd be enough Democratic votes, and I think there were a couple Republican votes, but in the end it was going to be a tie vote.

Kyle Melinn: And the tie vote happened on September 30, the day the fiscal year calendar ends and the new one was to begin, so there was all sorts of TV cameras and coverage at that session because the talk was, "We're going to have to shut government down, literally, if you can't come to something."

John Cherry Jr.: That's right, and so I had to cast that tie-breaking vote, and it happened. First of all, it was difficult getting it to a tie vote. It was getting people to live up to their

commitments. But in the end, the tie vote came. I cast the deciding vote, and I can remember going through my mind, I can't remember what movie that line is but that there's not going to be a rematch.

Kyle Melinn: And it was late too. It was 1:00 in the morning-

John Cherry Jr.: Oh, it was. Yes.

Kyle Melinn: 1:00 in the morning on October 1 where you had to cast that vote.

John Cherry Jr.: Right, yep. But it was done, and it saved us financially. It had the effect of making sure that when Rick Snyder came into the governorship, he came in with a surplus that he could decide how he wanted to deal with. He chose at that time to do a business tax cut. That was his piece. But in the end, he had the luxury of being able to decide.

Kyle Melinn: Well, and the reason I think he did that business tax cut is because that sales tax expansion on services didn't really fly in the business community. They took great umbrage to it. They said, "You know what? Instead, we want a surcharge on the business tax," was I think how it went. And so there was a big drive to do that. So the sales tax on services never really materialized because the business community convinced the Republicans, "Let's just do this surcharge that's just better and simpler and cleaner."

John Cherry Jr.: Right, yeah. Retirees could pay the difference.

Kyle Melinn: So let's fast-forward here then to 2009, the last of the governor's term. And at that time, Barack Obama had just won very convincingly for president, Democrats were looking pretty good, and you started snooping around on a campaign for governor.

John Cherry Jr.: I did. The governor couldn't run again. The Michigan economy was not healthy, and so it wasn't like there were people tripping over to run for governor. You didn't see any real congressional candidates emerging out of this. Some of them talked about it, but didn't emerge. But if you recall, at the time, there was a recession, and in fact, the auto industry was severely hurt. And in fact, some would argue that Obama won because of that recession that hit right there at the end of the Bush administration, and it was that that really killed off the McLean candidacy.

Kyle Melinn: John McCain.

John Cherry Jr.: John McCain.

Kyle Melinn: Yeah.



John Cherry Jr.: And so the first year of the Obama presidency was trying to figure out how to deal with this economic shortfall, which included a significant hit on the auto industry. They were really severely hurt, and there was a fear that there would be bankruptcies for GM and Chrysler, and Chrysler in fact did go through some degree of that, and it really required the Obama administration. And we worked very closely with them in trying to fashion a rescue piece for the auto industry. But nonetheless, while that was happening, it had a significant impact on autoworkers in Michigan.

So it was creating a severe problem, and in fact, it was part of the problem that led to the fiscal problem that we had. So people were just not... I can remember in the first term when the governor got reelected, people were pretty high in the job she'd done in her first term. But when you start to confront those crises, people begin to sour. And so it wasn't like it was the brightest opportunity for us, and that began to play out as I began to explore that candidacy. And right up until the last year, I was really serious about doing it, but in the end decided not to.

Kyle Melinn: Yeah, the auto industry had to have bailout right around that time. The economy hadn't really been any worse than it was at that particular time. And then we had the beginnings of the Tea Party movement start right there in 2009, and we started seeing that bubble up. And in the end there, it was probably hard to keep enthusiasm and the dollars coming in the door.

John Cherry Jr.: Well, and from a political perspective, all of the major financial support for the Democratic Party was just missing. Labor was suffering because they were bringing in less dues money, because people had been laid off. People who were traditionally small business people or attorneys or other professionals would say, "Oh geez, maybe next year I might be able to contribute. Right now, things are awful tight for me," And they weren't lying. In the economy, people were getting by, but they were just barely getting by. It wasn't necessarily a bright day in Michigan at that point.

Kyle Melinn: So we get to the first of 2010, and you looked at the books and-

John Cherry Jr.: We'd raised some money, but we also spent money just maintaining the political operation that the governor had maintained over the year. Like we said, we kept the operation separate from the policy offices. It was a operation that was separate and out the door, but we kept that operating, but there wasn't much to do beyond that, and so said it's not in the cards.

Kyle Melinn: At a certain point, your wife though did run for the legislature.

John Cherry Jr.: She did. At one point, a seat came open. I think the incumbent legislator was Rick Hamill. In fact, Rick was the Democratic leader at the time, but he'd been turned out so the seat was open, and my wife decided to run for it. Won a very close election.

Kyle Melinn: It was. It was very close, as I remember.

John Cherry Jr.: Right. She ran against a good friend who was fairly popular. It was a district that spread across the northern part of the Genesee County, and he was very popular in the eastern part, and my wife's base was in the western part. So it came down to I think less than 20 votes.

Kyle Melinn: He was in the labor union.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah, he was. He was the head of the Iron Workers.

Kyle Melinn: Yeah.

John Cherry Jr.: Yep. And at that point, he may even have been the head of the building trade.

Kyle Melinn: Yeah, I think he was the head of Building Trades at the time.

John Cherry Jr.: And a good guy.

Kyle Melinn: And then of course, your sister became a member of the state Senate as well, Deb Cherry.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah. She was actually there, she was in before my wife was. She was the state senator while I was lieutenant governor.

Kyle Melinn: Mm-hmm. And I mentioned at the very beginning too, your son got the bug as well.

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah, he did. Yep. He'd served on the Flint... They rewrote their charter and he served on the Charter Commission. And when Jim Ananich became the state senator for Flint, he ran for Jim's House seat.

Kyle Melinn: Mm-hmm. So after public service, what's been your focus? What have you put your mind to post-public service?

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah. It doesn't seem like I've had much spare time. First of all, I enjoy my grandkids. That takes up part of it. I enjoy golfing, and so I golf more now than what I did then. But I also serve on the Saginaw Valley University Board of Control, and that's something I've enjoyed. It's a university that serves the region very well, and so I feel like not only do I get to be involved in higher ed policy, but I really get an opportunity to help the economics of the area on top of that. And then I chair the Flint Institute of Science and History, which really is the organization that manages our Longway Planetarium and our museum, the Sloan Museum of Discovery, and that is just a pleasure. They're two institutions that enjoy a lot of community support and provide a lot of community service and do a lot of educational things, so that's a real pleasure.

Kyle Melinn: And then of course, you're on the list for Governor Whitmer and the emergency fill-ins for governor if everybody's gone, which actually happened during the convention. We had to look at that list like, who's on here as emergency fill-ins? And John Cherry is on that list. If Rachel Eubanks is unable to ascend to the position of governor, you're next in line.

John Cherry Jr.: Oh, there's always an argument who's on top because I'm first. But in the end, yeah, it's an honor to be in that position. The hope is you'll never ever have to serve in any official capacity, but it does show the confidence that the governor has in people when she names them on the list.

Kyle Melinn: Well, we're wrapping things up here, but I want to... Just as you reflect back on your public service and you think of where we are in the year 2024, what do you see? What strikes you the most as far as the changes that you've seen in how political figures, public officials work with each other compared to today?

John Cherry Jr.: Yeah. Sometimes I use my own children as a yardstick, only in the sense that I look at what I faced, as I say, a high school graduate, versus what they face as a high school graduate or what my grandkids might be facing. And I think Michigan is a better place today than it was in 1969 when I graduated from high school. Now, not that I did have a bad life and the community I grew up in is a community I love, so I don't want to suggest it was a bad circumstance, but there are a lot of things that are better today. Kids are challenged more in school and perform better. Even though there's a lot in the news about test results, the fact of the matter is kids have to learn more than I had to learn when I was in high school.

The opportunity to go to college is still a challenge, but more kids are going to college today, and the healthcare in the state is better. There are just a lot of things. The environmental circumstances, it's a cleaner environment than what it used to be. So I think out of all sorts of places you can look at and say, in the last 50 years, the world has improved dramatically here in Michigan. So I think that ought to be clear. I do think that the political system and the personalities within it don't really perhaps see it that way or give it enough credit because they're doing an awful lot of fighting, and as they do that, they blame each other for what they believe is a very difficult circumstance. Think what the world would be like if the airline industry competed with one another by publicizing the other's plane crashes. So that's how we manage our politics today.

Any other business wouldn't want to engage quite that way, but we do, and I'm not exactly sure... I would suspect that's because there are a number of factors that work. One of them is, its political consultants play a bigger role. We talked about moving the politics out of the building, and the people that now are in charge of that understand that the most effective way to change somebody's mind is to do a negative on somebody. And so, the whole system is designed to challenge the credibility of the system, and I think we're trying to figure out how to deal with that and have some confidence in the system when we're

constantly challenging it or challenging the people that are in it. And if I think there's something that we need to do moving forward, is to get a better sense of where we're really at and how we need to work together, and how we need to communicate in a way that advances public debate, not detracts from it.

Kyle Melinn: It's hard to have that kind of perspective though when you're knee-deep and your neck-deep into it, isn't it?

John Cherry Jr.: And people are attacking you. You want to get your hair up. But one thing I learned in politics, just because somebody's attacking you doesn't mean they dislike you. They may be challenging you, or that's just the way that they present themselves. In the end, the reason they're talking to you is they think you're important, or they think you have something to say, or they think you can do something about it. And so you need to not necessarily view them in a negative way. You've simply got to put your shield on and take the slings and arrows a little bit.

Kyle Melinn: And maybe this is a good place to end the interview, on the story that you shared with me off camera about the person who always came to your coffee hour, beating you up with a list of things that you couldn't seem to get right.

John Cherry Jr.: It was the best lesson I learned in politics, was, as I said, when I first ran for the House, there were four basic communities, and every Monday, I'd hold an office hour in one of them. So in the month, I'd hit the whole district. And when I'd go to Flushing, every time I went to Flushing, the same gentleman would show up and he'd come in with the list and he'd say, "Cherry, why'd you do this? Oh, you did this. What sense does that make? What were you thinking?" Every month, I'd have to put up with that. And then the Monday before the election, he came into my office hours in Flushing and gave me hell for not putting a yard sign in his yard.

And I thought, oh my God, what? I just couldn't believe it. And I realized, apparently my job is to take this, and if I can take it, then I earn some degree of respect. And so I learned that part of your job is to be the place that people can bring their complaints to. They need a human face to vent with, and your job is to be that face and to deal with it. And it's not always successful, but if at least you try, you get some points. In a time in which everything is virtual, you don't get that personal feel, and that diminishes the experience for both the elected official and the constituent.

Kyle Melinn: Well, some great words of advice here from former Lieutenant Governor John Cherry. Appreciate the time and the insight of-

John Cherry Jr.: Thanks. It was a pleasure.