

**Interview with Dick Sonntag, February 13, 1994**

ALISON: Dick tell me about growing up in politics.

DICK: Well, simply, there [were] two things. It forced the children of an elected official to be good. We could not raise the cane that other children raised. We always had to be aware that, if we got in trouble, it would be splashed on the front page of the local newspaper, especially with my dad being a Democrat and a supporter of equal rights and labor and those kinds of things. We had to tip toe very carefully around the things teenagers or children often do. We had to be able to be good and that was frustrating at times. Another thing we were expected -- As I got older into my teens and a little bit beyond, people would communicate and expect me to be able to respond to their problem whatever it might be as Dad did. It was nice to learn that if I got to working on a problem and would call the appropriate government officials, I would have some influence. That was interesting and rewarding.

ALISON: Even as a teenager?

DICK: Yeah, but the kinds of things a teenager would hear about. When I went to somebody's office or called them on the phone I was not just Dick Sonntag the citizen, I was Dick Sonntag, the son of the Pierce County Auditor, who definitely was the most important person in Pierce County. There was a difference and I could normally work out whatever it was that I needed to work out on behalf of whoever needed it worked out.

ALISON: It must have felt nice.

DICK: Very rewarding. My first experience with that was back in junior high school and, now and then, an issue would come up and it was always rewarding.

ALISON: How did it feel when -- well you have already answered kind of how it felt to be the son of the County Auditor and the effect it had on your life. Tell me a little bit about your dad.

DICK: Let me add one thing to the question that you did not ask. It forced -- As the children of an elected official, we were forced to develop a level of maturity faster than other kids our age. I see the same thing in my own son. I guess that just happens. In answer to that question, I was going to really remark about the source of pride in being able to deal with things most other teenagers could not deal with because of who my dad was not because of who I was. The forced instruction of or the forced learning of diplomatic skills. As to your third question --

ALISON: Wait, excuse me, I have a clarification. Would you say that part of the reason that you matured faster and became able to handle these had something to with the fact that it was expected of you?

DICK: Yes, not by him or Mom, but of those around him and the community at large. They expected the son of Jack Sonntag and I assume my older brother and my younger brother too, to be something more than just the average teenager.

ALISON: Thank you.

DICK: As an elected official he was very progressive, very

fair, very loyal to the people, those that worked for him and those throughout the county. Especially the working stiffs, the poor people, the farmers, I used to go on his re-election campaign trips around the County and he knew probably knew 40,000 people in this County by their first name and he never called them Mr. or Mrs. or Ms. because he knew them, "Hey George. Hey Sally. How you doing? I am driving through your community again, just stopped to chat with you to see what is on your mind."

He is the one that first coined the phrase "hire". I was sitting in a grange hall listening to him make a campaign speech for re-election and he is the one who first taught Brian and [me], through me at that time, what being an elected official really was. He told the citizens gathered in this grange hall, 20 or 30 of them that he didn't want to be elected. He hadn't been elected and he wasn't running for election. He told the folks that they hired him on a contract four years before. He was simply there saying, "I am here to report on the kind of job I have done and I am asking you to re-hire me." He made it very clear that he understood that he was an employee of the people. Brian and I may have expanded on that over the years and taken that the nth degree but Dad is the guy that started that and there was no other elected official or candidate for public office in those years ... talking like that, just Jack Sonntag.

As a dad he was very involved with his sons, simply great in all ways but it was kind of different. He was older at least in terms of my childhood. Normally, when you have a little boy 5 or 10 years old you have a father in his late 20's early 30's somewhere. Dad was

older. I think [he wanted] to be around me but [to have] me involved with the things he did rather than him being involved with things I wanted to do. He was half of one heck of a team in this community with Mom.

I think that the main thing [to remember about Jack Sonntag Sr.] is his feeling towards his role as an employee of the people. How they would call him up at home at night and at work and talk to him about some government thing being unfair, and regardless if it had anything to do with the county auditors office or not, him getting on his high horse and calling whoever needed to be called or stopping into their office and yelling and screaming and solving the problem. Whatever it was, you call Jack Sonntag and it got solved.

I learned from that. That is the function of an elected official. That is the only function. People don't need to be led. They can lead themselves. They need an employee to work for them on related issues.

ALISON: You used the term "team". Was your mother active in the politics early on? Did she participate in the political activities?

DICK: To the best of my knowledge, yes she did. She was certainly active in the community. In the evenings they were almost always together, but gone somewhere to meet some group of people and what Dad would do is listen to their concerns, not his, not him talking to them, but them talking to him. Whether it was strictly a social function or a quasi business function or just a meeting of some organization, they were together

pretty much.

ALISON: When and why did you make a decision as to whether or not you wanted to be an elected official when you grew up.

DICK: Quite frankly I don't like the things. Sitting in the front of the room, acting like I know more than everybody else in the room, drives me crazy. I have never turned on to it, it does not excite me. The problem was, when Dad died everybody and their brother were calling me up, as though I was the Pierce County Auditor, with them saying "this government agency over here did something unfair. Go correct it." It was frustrating because I did not have the influence to correct things. I certainly could accomplish some things, but not to the extent that I wanted to, and the people wanted me to or expected me to. They just assumed the mantel fell or transferred down to the next kid. Since I was involved politically with the young democrats and stuff and then working on various campaigns, I knew some of the elected officials and had some levels of expertise and people just assumed that I would be doing that [helping them]. I think that and the desire to perform a leadership role for my younger brother in terms of showing him that an elective office can be interesting aimed me towards it.

The big thing that happened in my life throughout the 1960's was when I went to college. I got very involved with the Civil Rights movement and with organized labor. If you want to make more influence on the government on behalf of labor, and if you wanted to go in to the 1970's and really do something about the any qualities of our nation and the unfair way people were

treated simply because of the color of their skin, then you needed to be in public office.

Dad was an administrative elected official. He was the county auditor. I ran for the Tacoma City Council. I wanted to be in a legislative capacity where the action was. I wanted to not just respond to problems, but to initiate policy, and I did and I am very proud of those three terms.

ALISON: Why do you suppose they called you rather than your older brother Jack after your father died?

DICK: To the best of my knowledge, they may have been calling him too. I think one reason they called me is I was involved politically.

ALISON: They had seen you.

DICK: I knew most elected officials, I had worked in campaigns of literally everybody. I rang my first doorbell when I was 5 or 6 years old for George Sheridan, not even for my own father. He wanted [me to help] George Sheridan campaign. I had been an officer state wide in the Washington State Young Democrats. I had -- other than holding elected office, I had done just about everything there was to do. A lot of people knew me because I would go to the political kinds of things with dad. During the years that Jack was gone -- my older brother Jack was gone to college and then into the Marine Corps. He did not have those kinds of opportunities.

ALISON: Tell me about growing up in Tacoma, Pierce County. What kind of a place was it when you were young? How

did it feel to be a boy here?

DICK: Wow! Other than a few elitist neighborhoods here and there, Tacoma is a working stiff town. My parents taught me to be Joe Average and not look down at other folks, regardless of who had money in their pocket or who didn't. If you got money that was to be shared with your friends.

I always thought Tacoma was -- didn't have the class of Seattle or the -- because we didn't have the alleged self-imposed sophistication. For instance, today you walk down the streets of Seattle, you can't go more than one block without seeing a espresso coffee stand on the corner, or a push cart. In Tacoma you can an awful long ways without seeing one. We don't have the status symbols. A nice common ordinary place for folks to grow up and to raise families and do normal things without putting on airs, that's why I have always liked this city. I love it!

I'm not sure any more can be said, but how does it feel to be a boy here? I had a ball as a boy. I had a livin' ball. I was not the worlds greatest student but I had a lot of fun. It was a little restrictive being the son of the County Auditor. I could not do some of the bad things, but that probably saved me from getting into a lot of trouble by being the son of an elected official. It was a ball. I had a lot of fun. I wish I were a little boy again in Tacoma.

ALISON: What do you know if anything about the evolution of the power structure in county politics? How was control maintained in your dad's time? Where did your dad fit in to the power structure? Is there still a reigning power structure in county or city government? If not

when and how did this change? That is a long and convoluted question, I apologize.

DICK:

I think the change occurred when we did away with the county commissioner form of government went to a county council. We did away with a bunch of other elected officials too. We jumped into a much more expensive form of government, but possibly a more open form of government and the more open your government is the more people participation you have the more honest and efficient it is going to be. You are not going to have anybody holding gigantic amounts of power in a personal sense. Back when my dad was in office as the Pierce County Auditor, we of course had the county commissioner form of government. I can think of Harry Sprinker as a very influential person in this county as chair person of the board of county commissioners. George Sheridan for many years, he was known throughout our state as Mr. Public Works. The guy was genius at public works stuff. Did he have from the amount of work that he did -- did he have more influence than he should have? I suppose any elected official who does 90% of the work while the others are out drinking the cocktails and going to the parties -- I suppose any elected official is going to be thought of as having more power than he or she should have, but somebody has got to do the job.

For many years in Pierce County it was whoever the chair person of the board of county commissioners was as the driving force of the county and Jack Sonntag the County Auditor because he choose to be more and do more than just run one office of government. It was said, when I was a kid, that, if you wanted something to move in this county, you did not talk to the county



commissioners you talked to the county auditor. That has nothing to do with the statutory authority of the county auditor. It had to do with the influence that my dad used throughout county government throughout government throughout our society in Pierce County on behalf of Joe Average for years.

When people started talking about Civil Rights and all of a sudden folks started realizing -- gee, do we have black employees here or not. Pierce County Government did not have any black employees so my dad hired one immediately, hopefully with lots of qualifications, which I assume she had because she stayed there several years.

ALISON: That would be Willy.

DICK: He hired the first minority race employee in administrative office in Pierce County Government. He went on from there with other minorities. He started the ball rolling because it was right, not because he was the worlds greatest liberal, but because it was right. I will honor him and his memory for that, if for no other reason than that. Simply because he wanted to do what was right for the people. If you are taking people's money in the form of tax dollars to pay your wages, you ought to be fair to all of those people. Dad started that philosophy. I learned [it] from him. I only wish that a lot more elected officials throughout our state and throughout our nation understood it and went by it.

ALISON: What factors influenced you to first enter politics? What kinds of political activities had you been involved in prior to running for office.

DICK: I worked in campaigns. ... I worked in the campaigns Dad told me to work in. I was very active in organized labor and extremely active in the Civil Rights movement as a college student and as a citizen, as a citizen of Tacoma and a college student at Olympic College in Bremerton.

ALISON: What were the political/social issues in Tacoma when you first ran for election?

DICK: All issues relating to Civil Rights were brand new in the City of Tacoma, we had just had -- Tacoma had a hard time with some elected city council members who were part of a very divisive city government. Whether you agreed with them, which I mostly [did not], or you disagreed, you had to acknowledge the fact that we had a divisive government. During my three terms on the city council we did away with the divisiveness because we had jobs to do, we had work to do. We did not have time to yell and scream at each other and to worry about international issues that were basically none of our business. We were hired by the people of Tacoma to deal Tacoma's problems and we did, especially in the area of emergency services, public safety, police, fire, and emergency medical service which we started back in the mid 70's and I am proud to say that we were one of the first on the west coast to require every fire fighter in the city of Tacoma to be a emergency medical technician and at the same time or shortly thereafter we started paramedic service. We were one of the few fire departments west of the Mississippi to have paramedics in the fire department. I am very proud of that. We also increased the size of our police department three times, with federal funds twice and our own funds once.

We did some gigantic things and I think a lot of things we did -- we went out and reached out to people minorities and poor people no matter what race and we said this is your government and you can be involved and we are going to have programs that respond to the needs that you have and we did. Whether it was the vegetable garden program, various outreach programs. We did it.

We demanded -- we started the -- I started the human rights commission in this city. It was my idea, I made the initial appointments. Obviously, the current mayor, Harold Moss, was a big part of that, the then mayor, Gordon Johnston, was a big part of it, but we did a collaborative kind of thing, we got it rolling. We got all kinds of equal rights things happening in this city and we were very proud of that and I remain to this day very proud.

We also, when citizens had problems, no matter if the problem was big or small with any government agency, we were quick to respond. Whether it was driving to their house at 3:00 in the morning to see a problem or whatever and making the phone calls necessary and the government actions necessary to respond to it. We did it. I think of Gordy Johnston and Harold Moss and myself as kind of a three person team that would always seem to get some others to support us on what we wanted to do, what needed to be done. The three of us were really out in front on a lot of things and I am very proud of that.

ALISON: Tell me what the human rights commission was envisioned to do and what kind of authority it had.

DICK: It had tremendous authority. It had policing authority. The ordinance has never been changed, other than a few i's had been dotted and a few t's had been crossed. It started with the authority to hold hearings, to investigate and to issue sanctions, to order the people be reinstated or not reinstated, to fine businesses and government agencies, to not fine them, to send information to the county prosecuting attorney, to recommend the prosecution; tremendous authority. To be used intelligently and fairly and not just to attack the business community and I think it was so used.

The goal was to -- for equal rights in terms of minority races. Quickly, it evolved into -- hey, we found out very rapidly that one thing that the business community did was oppress women. You could be a physical laborer but if you were a man you would make a lot more money than the chief executive officers secretary of some organization, even though she may have had several kids to support. The technology that she needed to do her job would be a heck of a lot more than a man. So we started getting into some fairness kinds of issues there. We did as a city council and we did through our arm the human rights commission and the human rights department.

You know that Human Rights as a department of Tacoma City government, prior to our creating it as a department, there wasn't any such department. We're very proud of that. We're very proud of the work that Allen Correl and the staff there has done.

ALISON: Correl is the head of Human Rights.

DICK: Yes, the department.

ALISON: Tell me about your first campaign. Tell me a little bit

about that first campaign for public office.

DICK: Well, it was like a big weight off my shoulders in a way that I had finally made the decision to run for public office and I was doing it. And it was going to provide a vehicle to help me solve a lot of problems. I'd never have to worry about having influence again. We didn't worry about winning or losing. We -- I had worked in enough campaigns. Brian had worked in some campaigns. We knew the things to do to run the ... campaign. I had developed my father's philosophy and I was certainly a student of it, an admirer of it and a practitioner of it. ... That philosophy, once explained to people, works. They vote for it. I mean they're going to hire the person who's going to be their employee rather than somebody who's going to be an elitist and try to do their thinking for them. People don't need that. They need a flunky, an employee, somebody to run errands for them, to do the work that they're too busy to do while they're out earning a living doing something else. Now, that's what they want. They don't need this big elitist thing.

I was very fortunate, I had for an opponent a nice man, but a man who definitely came from the silver-spoon-in-the-mouth parts of Tacoma and spoke their language. I was sad because I also had a minority race person run against me, but it was my first time out and his first time out, and nobody really knew me. ... They didn't know that I was an equal rights minded, progressive

minded employee of the people minded person. For all they knew, I was some just old fashioned politician or something. So, I felt bad in that way.

But it was a fun campaign. We won. We were out spent seven and a half to one and won. And when you're out spent seven and a half to one -- and we've been out spent, Brian and I, in our campaigns since then, by as little as two and a half to one and by as much as fifteen to one. We win because of the message and the understanding that we are employed by the people and we're also elected because we understand how to go get the job done for tomorrow. We're progressives and liberals. We're labor oriented and family oriented. We're not big shots in the business community. As a matter of fact, I used to love going to their social functions, when I was on the city council and not wearing a tie, or, if I did wear a tie, it was something that had a gimmick on it like pictures of Mickey Mouse or something.

ALISON: You said you were out spent seven and one half to one.

That was by your white opponent?

DICK: Yes, in the general election.

ALISON: In the general -- The black opponent was taken out in the primary?

DICK: Yes.

ALISON: Was [he] a leader in Tacoma? Anybody that --

DICK: No.

...

ALISON: Number ten. In the late forties, as part of a clean-up of the city government, an elitist city council was elected. According to Murray Morgan, "perhaps the best educated city council in the history of American government." How does this compare to the council onto which you were elected?

DICK: Well, I like to think we had a few brains. But what we had was a commitment to go do some things for people that they wanted done. We were employees of the people, and coming from Jack Sonntag's house, maybe I understood that better than the others. But I think the other folks on our city council, certainly Gordy Johnston and Harold Moss, had an understanding of that philosophy. If not in exactly the same words as my way of putting it, they were of the same ilk.

ALISON: Well, you had an architect and a lawyer.

DICK: The previous city council that Murray Morgan referred to and a lot of city council people and a lot of elected officials -- and you run into this in the council/manager form of government. The council members are part time. They're normally working stiffs, can't afford to be on the city council. It was not easy for me to be on the council as you know. There is no way in the world I would have been able to afford it if I had a family. [It] just wouldn't have happened. Moss worked essentially part time all the years he was on the council. 'Cause you got to put in forty or fifty hours a week doing the council stuff.

At any rate, I don't think the education of other

council members mattered in getting the job done. It's not a highly technical job. It's one of service, and one of understanding who the boss is. ... Do the people work for the elected official, or does the elected official work for the people. That's the difference, not the individual smarts of a given human being, but the common sense, the understanding of what role you play verses what role the people play.

... I've served with lots of elected officials, both on the Tacoma School Board, on the Tacoma City Council. I've known others who are so into how smart they are that they forget who the heck they work for. They haven't the faintest idea who's in charge --

...  
This is facetious, but, if the people of a given city tell their government that they want peanut butter sidewalks, the only question government should ask is [creamy] or crunchy. They should not say, "No, no, we can't have peanut butter sidewalks." We'll have whatever the Hell the people say we'll have. Period. They're the boss.

...  
ALISON: Tell me about race and labor relations during your time on the council and your involvement with or impact upon.

...  
DICK: Tacoma, as a government, had a history of ignoring its own employees, whether you're talking about police and fire fighters or the clerical union -- all of the groups of Tacoma city employees. Tacoma was very management oriented. We'll listen to the big shots, but we're not going to listen to the rank and file people. Tacoma, as a community, though, was kind of a labor town. ... Our unions had as much influence in Tacoma as anywhere on the west coast, except for maybe



San Francisco. L. H. Pedersen, the head of our Central Labor Council, was a very influential person in this community. Nothing moved without L. H.'s approval. And he ... was appointed by Booth Gardner to serve on the state liquor board after he retired as head of the labor council.

... I, having been a working stiff, and a member of unions, -- Matter of fact my first union [experience] was as a teamster -- I really respected the rights and needs of labor. And until -- Well, my current union, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees [AFSCME], for all state employees -- We responded to, and I am very proud to be a member of a union that would do this, the subject of comparable worth (Comp. Worth). We finally figured out as a union that the female state employees are the people who worked in traditional clerical jobs, which 99% of them were at that time female. The people that worked craft jobs 99% of whom were male received tremendously different payments for their service, even though the skill level might be equal.

We caused the legislature to order the state government (State Department Personnel) to go examine every position in state service and to figure out what it should be paid equal to. We didn't reduce the wages of any class. We simply raised the clerical administrative support functions and Gardner got a raise and a bunch of other working stiff jobs to make them equal, so that we would not have somebody who sat behind a desk making less money than the person who swept the floor. While both jobs were important, one takes a little bit more technical ability than the other and may be need even specialized training. I was very proud of that.

Race relations in our city, as I said -- Now, I was very active in race relations, both the freedom summer of 1964 and at the college level in the 1960's, which was definitely the place to be if you wanted to be involved in race relations. I was never involved in the anti-war movement, that did not happen at my school, maybe because we had an awful lot of veterans, I am a veteran in the United States Navy and I was a veteran when I went to college. We got involved in race issues, simply out of a matter of fairness. It was clear to me and my generation at college that equal rights was fair; and unequal rights was not fair. Discrimination is kind of a black and white issue, it is either right or it is wrong. To me discrimination is wrong at all times; for all reasons. I believe that I am a black and white person. There are a lot of books that say a little discrimination won't hurt, lets discriminate against this group here; but we will love all the other groups. NO. That is not right, discrimination is either right or wrong.

ALISON: The freedom summer of 1964; did you spend that here in this area?

DICK: Yes. My fraternity and myself as an individual contributed the money to sponsor one (1) person from Olympic College to go to Mississippi. When he got back with all of the scars from the bull whips on his back, I saw them, I know they were there and they were not there when he left. He was a member of the Olympic College football team, if I remember right he was a B+ student in college. We send a young black man down there, who is really a good guy; not a trouble maker or anything. He came back having been arrested and beaten with bull whips. We put together his story in a lesson

plan and then with the 1965 Civil Rights Act, I went around to various community groups in Kitsap County, mainly churches and spoke on behalf of the Civil Rights Act and of the encounters of my peer during the freedom summer of 1964. A man by the name of Arthur Krietzer, in terms of history or his family's history, a Russian jew went to all these meetings with me and was the warm up speaker. He introduced me and we used to think that was funny; the Russian jew introducing the German Catholic, to talk about black civil and voting rights. We were deeply involved in that issue and I certainly was proud of my work. The work I did in this state and the work I did in Kitsap County in Bremerton while going to college and the work I later did on the City Council right here and the work I did nationally as a member of the Puget Sound Council of Governments, therefore, their National Association.

ALISON: Tell me a little bit about your relation to labor when you were on the City Council.

DICK: I was, and am to this day, totally supportive of organized labor, their rights, the problems facing them, and I totally support the right of workers to organize and to be heard on a collective basis. When I was on the City Council, the contracts that we gave out were certainly not exorbitant. We did pride ourselves on having fair contracts; I am with the Tacoma School District now. We have thirteen (13) bargaining groups, therefore, thirteen (13) contracts, all of them appear to be fair to everybody, paying acceptable wages. Nothing great; nothing bad.

ALISON: Were you ever directly involved in Labor Negotiations when you were on the City Council?

DICK:

One time. The head of the Joint Labor Committee, which was, for negotiating purposes the committee made up all of the unions involved in the negotiations at one time. The head of that committee, Lou Hatfield, a former leader of the Teamsters in our community, came to me and said "Dick we are in mediation with a state mediator, the city management is cheating. I would not ask you to interfere Dick, except we are being treated unfairly. They will not even sit in the same room and talk to us. They have this mediator running back and forth, we are on two (2) different floors of the utilities building." I could not believe it, but I had known Lou long enough to know that he was telling me what he thought to be the truth, so the next day I went out there at his invitation to see this.

It was true. The city management negotiating team was in one room on one floor and the Joint Labor Committee was in another room on another floor and the state mediator, very much an older gentleman would walk back and forth. All the city management folks would do is say "No!" to everything.

I lasted about two (2) hours following this guy around and then the black and white part of me came out and said "No... No... this is wrong; this stops now." I went to the city folks and I said, "What are the issues that you have to have? What are the issues that you are willing to compromise on?" After arguing for thirty (30) minutes and having one of them leave the room and call the city manager; who threatened to take me to Court and have my job as a councilman because I was getting involved in negotiations. I really was not trying to get involved, I just wanted them off of square one (1). I told [him] "Good! Take me to court.

Have a ball." I got the city negotiators to tell me the one or two or three things that they had to have and the items that they were willing to negotiate on. Most of the things that had been on the table, they were willing to negotiate on even though they had not negotiated them. They were just sitting there. Just taking up the tax payers dollars, just sitting there. I went down to Labor and I said "What are the one or two things that you have to have?" They were not being exactly too friendly on the negotiation end either, [but] at least they were willing to negotiate. It was just that no one was willing to negotiate with them and the state mediator was not doing a great job of passing back and forth information on negotiating points.

Anyway we wound up putting the thing together in about an one and a half hour and we had almost every City of Tacoma employee involved with their union involved in that. I was extremely proud of that. I went home that day figuring I earned the paycheck, the paycheck may have only been \$300.00 a month, but I earned it that day. If I had not gotten involved they would probably still be sitting there trying to negotiate. How the hell can you negotiate with somebody when you are not only in separate rooms, but on different floors of the building. We were lucky they were in the same damn building.

ALISON: You have kind of answered number twelve, telling me about some of the things that you have accomplished as a council member of which you are most proud. Is there anything that you would like to add to that?

DICK: I think that No.1 is the public safety bit. We improved ... public safety in the city of Tacoma. We

started emergency medical service within our fire department. We started paramedic service. We did those things and I'm very, very proud to have been the lead in increasing the size of the police department, in starting emergency medical service, starting paramedic service. We purchased two fireboats for the city with grant money. ... The citizens of Tacoma didn't pay a penny for them. I'm very proud of that.

I'm very proud of the work that the city council did under the leadership, possibly, of Gordy Johnston, Harold Moss and myself, in terms of equal opportunity and equal rights in this community.

... I suppose, as a third item, I'm very proud of the respect that labor received from us. ... I think that we taught management that there's nothing wrong with organized labor. This is just the same folks that work with you all day long, just speaking to you collectively. It's amazing how scared management is of the collective voice of organized labor -- just scares the heck out of them. ... They want to leave town fast. I think that's a big joke myself. Fortunately, there are some managers in this world who respect the rights of their employees. The reason you have unions is because there's an awful lot around who don't respect their employees rights. ... That's why you have organized labor. If all managers were fair, we wouldn't have organized labor -- wouldn't need it. ...

Those are the three biggies. ... Just working for the people, I guess, would have to be number four. And getting a chance to teach other elected officials about the philosophy of "We are the employees. The people are the boss. We need to have an open public process."

For instance, when I went on the Tacoma City Council, the council had seven citizen advisory committees. That's a rather exclusive process. When I left, we had twenty-eight, which included the Human Rights Commission as a fairly new thing. When you have twenty-eight citizen advisory committees, you have lots of folks coming to lots of meetings, giving input and advice to the city council as to how to run the city.

When you hold all your meetings in public -- you might remember when the city council got sued [ALISON: I do.] for holding secret meetings, I didn't go to those meetings. That was some other folks. I wouldn't even walk in the room. They were going to discuss the people's business in private -- Wrong! I'm not gonna be there. And they got sued, those that attended the meeting, and they had to spend a lot of money getting out of that one, out of their personal pockets. The government didn't pay for ... their attorneys or any of their expenses.

I think from that and from some leadership that I was able to provide they learned a little bit about open meetings and citizen participation.

ALISON: There are some specific conditions under which a legislative body may hold secret meetings, though, are there not?

DICK: There are, but -- labor negotiations, when negotiations are in progress, can be -- the updates, the reports and the strategy planning can be done in secret. 'Cause, obviously, you don't do labor negotiations in public.

The same thing with real estate prices. Like, I'm on

the school board now. If our school district management, which needs our approval, the board's approval, to do something, wants to go over to whatever neighborhood and buy a piece of property -- If we did that at a public meeting, held the initial conversations on that and it got in the News Tribune, the price of the property would sky-rocket. So, the law allows us to hold those initial conversations [in private]. When we actually appropriate the money to buy the piece of property, we have to do that at a public meeting. And rightly so. But, the initial conversations to allow the staff to go out and attempt to buy it, yeah, that can be in executive session.

PERSONNEL: Personnel issues can be in executive session. For instance, if an employee takes a grievance all the way to the school board -- now our contracts are written so that most of our employee grievances can get to us if they don't like management's response at the lower couple of levels. Those are personnel actions, and you're talking about somebody's right to confidentiality. That kind of stuff is kept quiet. And, unless there is some criminal act involved, and, once charges are filed, then, of course, it's public information. But prior to that, in the investigatory stages, it's not public information.

... All personnel issues -- For instance, if you're going to hire somebody -- We just hired a superintendent, Oh, less than a year ago, Dr. Rudy Crew. We made a very good choice, let me tell you. ... Dr. Crew and others competed for that job. It was not proper to have all of this competition and all of these names reported in the News Tribune, so, to an extent, this stuff was done in private. And the initial



interviews -- although the final interview -- We required Dr. Crew and the other finalist to be interviewed by the public at an open public meeting, with the citizens asking questions, not board members. We also conducted an interview and those were public. But the initial ones, the early ones, to go through and screen the candidates, they were private. One reason for them being private is so somebody could apply for a job here, but, not getting it, would not have risked the wrath of his or her current employers. So, yeah, personnel action to a ... very limited extent can be held in private, in executive session.

...

ALISON: Tell me about your run for sheriff and what part the Democratic party leadership played.

DICK: Without mentioning individuals by name, in 1974, I wanted to run for Pierce County Sheriff. I can remember going to the office of a high level official in this community and saying, "Hey, I want to do this. What do you think?" and having this official ask me questions about "how would you handle this kind of ethical thing, if it should come up as sheriff?" And, as I told you before, I'm kind of a black and white person. Those answers are easy for me. It's either right or it's wrong. And I can remember being in this person's office three times. All three times hearing that kind of questioning.

I then went to a meeting of city officials in Los Angeles, California for a few days. We were doing some work on juvenile justice, the juvenile justice act, the national one, and we had a meeting in Los Angeles. I

was gone for three or four days. I came back and a very influential person within the organized labor community took me to lunch and said, "Dick, I'm here representing, and named a few other folks, and we've decided that you're not going to be the candidate of our group of influential people for sheriff." And I said, "Well, I don't want to be anybody's candidate. I want to be the people's candidate." But he said, "Our group will finance your campaign if you want to run" for another county office against an incumbent, a very nice man and efficient, too, Maury Raymond. His son, Dick, is a retired Tacoma police sergeant, very honorable guy. Maury, of the old time politicians, he was not a team player with the gamesters. He had a lot of respect. ... I was one of those that respected him and I had no intention of running against him. Plus, I got my dander up and I said, "To Hell with all you guys, I'm going to run for sheriff."

Well, I learned very fast that you need to be anointed by the power consortium of the Democratic party and organized labor and a few other influential folks to run for something. And there was no way in the world they wanted me to be sheriff. And I suppose I should be glad that I lost that effort. And I lost it bad. I was out spent fifteen to one and was beat at the polls by four -- three and a half -- to one. So, on a per capita basis, I should have won. I didn't have the big business money. I didn't have organized labor money. I didn't have the special many thousands of dollars that came from rather special places. And I suppose I really shouldn't say that, because some of it was untraceable. Believe me, we tried to find where the money came from. And we ran into roadblocks.

I would put signs up in the county one evening. The next day the signs would be down. You couldn't find a Sonntag sign that stayed up in Pierce County, when I ran for Sheriff, for more than twenty-four hours. It just didn't happen. Except within the city of Tacoma. Now, within the city my signs stayed up.

However, I lost that election. And I probably should be glad I did, because I'm not sure I would have had the knowledge and expertise to handle the size and scope of the problems that came to light four or five years later.

ALISON: You believe, then, that the reason that a political candidate needs this anointing is because following the anointing is money?

DICK: Uh huh. Yeah, back in those days, if I hadn't been headstrong, if I had done what they said, I would have been retired from county government by now with a very fat retirement, having served as the county treasurer for a bunch of years. One would assume that when they told me they would buy me out of the sheriff's race by paying for my campaign for county treasurer -- one would assume that I was going to win. Because they definitely were the folks with the big money. And, if I didn't know that prior to that election of 1974, I sure learned that during the election. They had tons of money. I had -- well, I had less than three thousand dollars.

I remember telling you on election night, "Stay home. I'm going to go handle this." Because I knew it was going to be a loss, and I knew you'd be upset, because you and Brian both assumed somehow we were going to

win. Well, no matter how good you are at understanding who the employer is ... or the over all message to people, at some point, elections can be bought. Elections in the State of Washington are bought all the time. I think we are cleaner than that in Pierce County and Tacoma, now. We don't do that. Those kinds of things don't happen anymore here. They sure did back then.

ALISON: Possibly, they don't happen anymore because of what happened afterward.

DICK: Well, that could be. We would up with a new form of county government. ... We have an appointed county sheriff, now, rather than an elected one. I think that elected officials -- it's up to the people to elect people that are good people, but I really think that having elected officials is a lot more representative of the people -- gives the people more voice in their government than having appointed officials. So, I would like to see a lot more elected officials in Pierce County. I'm not sure that it's necessary to elect the county coroner, and I'm not excited about partisan elections for administrative jobs. For instance, I never thought it was real intelligent to have Democrat or Republican county sheriff. You're only going to give traffic tickets to people from the other party?

At any rate, I hope that the sheriff thing is a very small part of your report, if anything, because that was a very small part of my life. I did nothing for anybody, including myself, in that effort. My life has been one of service, and performed no service during that time.

ALISON: The only reason the question of running for sheriff comes into it at all is that it's an indication of power politics.

DICK: It was sure an example. I mean I'm the guy that got the public disclosure commission rolling in 1972. I'm nutso on ethics kinds of things in government for elected officials. And I was pretty well-known for that. I suspect that was part of why I made the big boys nervous. That and, every time I went to a meeting in the big boy's offices, they would ask me questions and I apparently was giving the wrong answers. "How would you handle this kind of thing?" or "Do you think it's okay for people to do that?" And -- How old was I then, thirty-two? -- I was sure giving some black and white answers.

ALISON: Well, that's what you would do. I was disappointed when you lost. I was disappointed because of the reason that you lost. And I felt somewhat vindicated a few years down the road when the person who beat you with the big money backing was arrested and charged with a crime.

Tell me about running for and serving on the Tacoma School Board. What are some of the issues you deal with today?

DICK: ... I feel like I've backed up to the fifties in a lot of ways. I was president of the PTA for Manitou elementary. The Tacoma School district wanted to build the new Manitou School, which had been approved by the voters back in 1988, out in Fircrest at Cirque and Alameda. And we of the Manitou community said, "No, no, no. You guys are ridiculous. You build the

Manitou school in Manitou, not in Fircrest." ... So changing that decision was not easy. We wound up with a big hullabaloo, and we eventually got it changed. And we now have, being built, just a few blocks from us, right up by Manitou Park, a new Manitou Elementary School, called Manitou Park Elementary. And it's going to be beautiful and it will open in the Fall of '94.

That was the issue that got me going. I got involved in school board stuff through because of some other issues, too. Mainly citizen involvement or the lack thereof. I would go to school board meetings and these folks would all sit there and play rubber stamp for the manager and they'd all have unanimous votes and they'd never discuss anything. And, lo and behold, no citizen ever wanted to talk to them either, or speak at any of their alleged public meetings. And they held lots of executive sessions.

So, I ran for the school board and got elected. We have dealt with citizen participation and not holding so many executive sessions and having lots of citizens involved, including students, in the various decision making processes of the school district.

I've had some successes. I've had some issues that remain unsuccessful. The Tacoma School Board still likes to hold lots of tax-payer financed retreats. The executive sessions I'm not convinced are all required. But, I think that we have done some things. We have fewer retreats than we used to have. We stay in the district more often than we used to. And we have a more open process for citizens at our public meetings.

I can remember being told when I first got to the

school board by then superintendent, Lillian Barna, "You need to understand something, Sonntag. School board meetings are not public meetings. It's a meeting of the board in public." Obviously, I consider that 100% wrong. I know who I work for. But I went to work with some folks down there who really believe that. I think now they are believing a little bit different. It's partly thanks to me. It's partly thanks to our new superintendent, Rudy Crew. It's partly thanks to our board president, Debbie Winskill, who is very much a neighborhood rights activist. I think we have some fairly good people on the [school board]. Getting an attorney, Marilee Scarbrough, on the [board] didn't hurt anything. Attorneys are pretty good at understanding right and wrong. We may not always like what they say or do, but they understand the difference between right and wrong.

The biggest issue to me was the crime issue in this community, being committed by people in their young teens. People twelve to fifteen years of age. Five and one half years before I went on the school board, the Tacoma School board ... took sports out of the junior high schools. Matter of fact, they stopped having junior high school and invented something called "Middle School."

My number one thing in running for public office, running for the school board -- and I had no desire to go back into politics, believe me. Somebody else was supposed to run. She finked out at the last minute. I was the only viable option other than a big shot from the North End. And we'd had enough North Enders on the school board, enough elitists on the school board, if you will.

AL:SO: So, I decided I would run. And the big issue to me was, "Get these kids that are out committing crimes every afternoon after school into something constructive." The school board, under the advice of Lillian Barna, had taken sports out of the junior high schools, middle schools, five years before. It was my stated objective. "If you folks elect me to the school board, we will have sports back in the middle schools."

WE: We did that. We did it immediately. It took three months of hard fighting with some of the school board members to get them to vote for it. I wound up having to go to the police chief [Ray Fjetland] to get him to send each of them a personal letter telling them to vote for it to get the kids off the streets -- that it was important law enforcement-wise. And finally, thanks to [Chief] Fjetland's involvement, the board voted for it. Their vote was unanimous, and I wound up getting more money for the middle school sports program than I'd asked for by twenty-five percent.

AL: The program, which we've called extra-mural, is now in its second year, going great guns. I expect over three thousand kids this year will be either playing a sport or watching a sport being played. ... We've got boy's and girl's teams playing just about everything you can imagine, except for tackle football. And they're having a ball. I'm proud of 'em. And the big thing that's not happening is that they're not out after school driving the Tacoma Police Department nuts and burglarizing our homes.

TAPE CHANGED



ALISON: We were talking about the Tacoma School board.

DICK: Well, I think the biggest issue is the sports at the junior high school or middle school level. Equal to that issue is the public participation in the decision making processes of the school district and the understanding of the school board as to what they are as elected officials and the role of the people. Obviously, as you know, I have not convinced everybody on the school board of that, but I think we now have a majority on the school board who [believe it should be] open. I'm very pleased we have achieved that, because, as you know, I'm resigning in a few months and I would like to have that accomplished before I resign.

ALISON: The school board consists of five individuals?

DICK: Five separately elected officials.

ALISON: And at least three of them, probably four tend to believe that it's appropriate that the meetings are open.

DICK: I think that there's two strong believers in that, two that accept that as an argument ... but want to do some other things now and then. And there's still one board member who really believes that he [or she] is in charge of education and to heck with the people.

ALISON: The attorney that you mentioned, Marilee Scarbrough, she is also a black woman?

DICK: Definitely. I'm very pleased to have been on the Tacoma School Board when we appointed Marilee to fill a vacancy. Therefore, for the first time in the history

of the Tacoma School District, we have a minority race board member.<sup>36</sup> I'm proud to have been part of that.

...

DICK: ... I think the number one issue of the Sonntags is this philosophy of government -- who the boss is. That's the important story to tell. Along with that is the respect for the little guy and the respect for organized labor and the respect for equality. The over-riding thing there is the philosophy of the elected official understanding what his or her role is and who is in charge. I hope that your project brings forth that philosophy. ...

ALISON: ... From your perspective, where are we as a community on issues of race and economics and where are we headed.

DICK: I think that we -- Now, on issues of race, if you mean discrimination in general, I think we still have some road to go. I think that there are still elements of our society that we are not allowing into the main stream. For instance, the gay rights movement. I don't think we, as a society, have come to grips with those folks rights as yet. But in terms of race relations, I think we've come a long way. This is supposed to be this big, conservative working people's town south of Seattle. I think that we can laugh at Seattle in terms of race relations. The mayor of Tacoma is my good friend and a black man, Harold Moss.

---

<sup>36</sup> Marilee Scarbrough was the first African-American on the Tacoma School Board of Directors. There have been other minorities, including Scarbrough's predecessor, Asian-American, Eugene Matsusaka.

The city manager is Ray Corpuz, as Asian. The assistant city manager is a black man, Jim Walton. The director of public health for Tacoma/Pierce County is a Hispanic-American. The superintendent of schools is a black man. There are minority race elected officials: Deloras Silas on the city council, Art Wong and Rosa Franklin in the state legislature, Marilee Scarbrough on the school board.

If you were to line up all the people in influential government posts in the Tacoma area, both elected and non-elected, I think we have more minority race folks in positions of influence per capita than Seattle and King County on their best day would ever dream of having. I'm very proud of that.

We're a very pragmatic community. We're not as elitist as Seattle or Bellevue. We're very pragmatic in that we're common sense. We have a clear understanding of right and wrong for the most part. And we're blue collar rather than white collar and we go get the job done. And the job of race relations in this community -- thanks and awful lot to the city council in the seventies -- the job of race relations in this community is as done, public policy-wise, as that job ever will be.

Are there still instances of racism that occur in our community? Yes. Our NAACP office was recently bombed. These things do continue to happen. The phenomenon of skin heads is raising its ugly bald head throughout our nation, and, certainly, in our community as well. And we need to be ever vigilant on fairness and equality issues. I think that we have done the government job on equal rights. And I think we have equality in

employment in this community. I think we have made tremendous progress. And while there is still some ways to go in certain related areas, I think that we are the out-in-front leader in the State of Washington in terms of race relations.

As you have said yourself, when a citizen looks at an entity of government, be that a student looking at the Tacoma School district staff-wise, or a citizen walking into any government, he/she needs to look at that element of government and see the community of tax payers reflected. If twenty percent of us are senior citizens, then twenty percent of the employees should be senior citizens. If twenty percent of us are from minority races, then twenty percent of the employees should be minorities. And I don't mean just in entry level positions. I mean in management, too. The public employees of any given community should reflect the racial mixture of that community, and the economic mixture and the everything else mixture.

In terms of economics, by having elements of government in our area committed to fairness, we have created an opportunity for economic well-being and quality. I think, for the most part that is achieved. Our society, as a whole, still has -- and this is thanks to the Reagan era of the 1980's -- we have created an "under class" that is not exactly middle class anymore. It is working stiffs that haven't got enough money to make ends meet and raise their families. So they're not able to participate in community life like they did twenty or thirty years ago. And we've created this "under class" that is not the poor, not the unemployed poor, but they've taken the place of the middle class. The middle class doesn't exist anymore. And I think

that, once we achieve health care for all, insurance for all, which our new insurance commissioner, Deborah Senn, is working on -- health care being the biggie -- I think we will have taken even some more giant strides in ... having economic fairness in ... our nation and in our community.

Right now I think we're in pretty good shape.

... [Interviewer asks question about whether or not mentioning that a child might have two fathers or two mothers in a teaching manual should be considered "promoting homosexuality."]

DICK: Family values issues are not the business of the school board, the Tacoma School board or anybody else's school board. We ... should be required to, and I think we are required to, at least I am as a human being required to make sure that everything we do -- Because we are paid by all of the tax payers, we need to make sure that everything we do is fair, fair to everybody. And, regardless of what a family consists of, it is none of our business. We are to be fair to the children, provide equal education opportunity to all children. And exactly what their parents do, or who their parents are, or what their religion is, what their sexual orientation is, what their handicaps are, what their race is, I don't see that as any of the business of the Tacoma School Board.

In terms of promoting gay rights, or homosexuality, or what-have-you. We are not in the business of promoting any family value... That's not our role. What our role has to be, in part, is observant. If a force comes along that wants to restrict our students in any way, we need to be vigilant. We need to resist that.

Now, if that means coming along and attempting to edit adopted curriculum tools in school books, I think that we need to offer citizens the opportunity to have input into those. But the bottom line is we need to have materials that help children learn and that are fair, and stay out of issues that are not our direct concern.  
...

[Statement by Dick having to do with the current battle over gay rights in Washington state followed by a conversation on the subject, including discussion about a controversial part of a teacher's informational manual]

DICK: ... All the writer of the program was trying to do is to make sure that, in telling the teachers about family, that they are fair to all kinds of families. And we're not promoting, or unpromoting anything. What we are promoting is children sitting in a classroom not feeling bad because they're different. And I really don't care if they're different because of the color of their skin, or their handicap, or their parent's skin color or handicap, sexual orientation or what-have-you. The important person in the equation is not the adult, who does something the rest of us like or don't like or who is something the rest of like or don't like. The important person is not us or the parent. The important person is the child. And everybody who gets involved in this issue is ignoring that. The important person in the equation is the child.

And that's what this school business is all about. If you're not thinking of children. If you're not thinking of the future, then you shouldn't be in the business.

ALISON: Is there anything else you think I should know?

DICK: No, I think I've used up enough of your tapes. The philosophy of government -- The philosophy of who the boss is has been the driving force behind me, when I was involved in government. And I was kind of a transition person between Jack Sonntag Sr., as the county auditor and Brian Sonntag, as the county clerk, the county auditor and, now, the state auditor. And he's taken that philosophy throughout the state of Washington. And it's new. He's getting tremendous reception from the people. He's driving politicians nuts. As big shots in Pierce County called me in to lecture me in 1974, it was just recently that some big shots in the state government called Brian in to lecture him. To tell him he needs to be more of a team player, knock off all this citizen participation stuff. And Brian was polite, said "Thank you very much" and is still going about his business. And his business is involving the people in running their government.

And I don't think you can have a higher calling in life that to be dedicated to working for the people. And Brian Sonntag definitely understands who employs him. And I'm very proud of him. I'm proud that I had some successes as the transition person in government between Jack Sonntag and Brian Sonntag. And I wouldn't be on the school board now except I got mad about some things. I really thought, after three terms on the city council, my contribution, from an elected official standpoint was over. But then you know me, I go gettin' mad about stuff.

ALISON: Why did you -- you call yourself the transition person. Why did you think it was appropriate that you hold the spot open for Brian? Why would it not have been appropriate for you to go ahead politically?

DICK: I'm not nice enough. I'm a very black and white person. It's either right or it's wrong. And I'm not real good at saying, "Well, gee, that's okay, but I think we ought to go this other way." If something is wrong, I'm real quick to say, "It's wrong. Let's do the other thing." I'm not real diplomatic. And, while that was fine on the Tacoma City Council back in the seventies, when we were bringing Tacoma into the century that it had already been in for seventy years, and we were doing some equal rights kind of things and we were modernizing ourself public safety-wise. We were moving ahead by leaps and bounds, there was definitely a role, a place for a person like me. But in the normal life of government, you want people who are a little more polite, a little bit more diplomatic. And that definitely was my father, that definitely is Brian. Although Brian still keeps his eyes on the prize and goes for exactly the same results I go for, I think he gets there more often than I ever have, because he is more polite.

ALISON: Doesn't leave as many bloody noses in his wake?

DICK: No, people are normally smiling after he rolls over them. They're seldom smiling -- they're seldom standing after I've rolled over them. And if they think they've seen something now, wait until that thirteen year old hits 'em in about ten years [referring to his son, Jack H. Sonntag].

ALISON: Okay, I think that's all I have. Thank you very much.

DICK: Thank you, Dear.