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Robert Allison interview with Richard R. Tisei, Senate Minority Leader, 2007-2011

Interview date: 2017

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Allison: Okay, so we're happy to have Senator Richard Tisei with us to talk a bit about your life in politics, so can you tell us what brought you into public life?

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Richard Tisei: First, thanks for having me. It's nice to be here in the Senate President's office. The way I got involved in politics actually, there are probably other people in the building who had the same experience, but I came from a family that wasn't political. We never talked about current events or politics around the dinner table, but when I was in high school I was chosen to participate in Student Government Day. And I believe that was in 1981, and at that time, I don't know what, I know the program still exists now, but it was a program where it was pretty extensive, you came to the State House for a couple of hearings, the students all submitted ideas for bills, there were hearings, and then the big crescendo day you'd go to the House Chamber and you would participate. Really, I was the state representative for the day so I got to sit in the House Chamber and vote on the different bills and it was such an awesome experience, the whole concept of self-government and the way things worked that I decided pretty much at that point that this was for me and this is what I was really interested in doing. And I remember when I came home that night from the big day, a friend of mine asked me, "Well, how did you like it?" and I said, "I really liked it, I'm going to be, I'm going to run for state representative." And it turned out that I was in college three years later, and the incumbent state representative decided not to run for reelection, and I ended up running for the seat. And it was an open seat, there were, and the interesting thing was the first 6 months, I had to graduate in one year, I had two years left, I graduated in a year so I could do it, and I drove home every weekend between January and May to campaign.

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Allison: Where were you in college?

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Tisei: I was at American University. It was an 11 hour drive, were to leave Thursday night, drive home, come spend the weekend, leave Sunday. And it was the funnest, hardest thing I've ever done, the funnest experience, and the thing that was interesting, made it really interesting, is that there was a big movement in the state to make the House more democratic. Small d.

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Allison: Small d, right.

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Tisei: The Speaker of the House had been considered somewhat of an iron-fisted Speaker and a lot of the members were frustrated, and it was a really unusual time in Massachusetts politics

because the Speaker's Majority Leader announced against him and the Democratic Party was pretty much split in two. And you were either a McGee supporter or you were a Keverian supporter and, and that played out all across the state in all kinds of districts, and it turned out in my district, I was 21 at the time that I was running, and I got elected, I turned 22 by the time I was sworn in, and there was a big fight on the Democratic side between the different forces, and the McGee guy won the primary, which was unusual because everywhere else the Keverian people prevailed, and it just so happened that the, Keverian's Chief of Staff lived in my district, a number of his staff people they were all watching my race really closely and knew that I philosophically I was more in tune with him, and it turned out, it was a rules reform, that's what they called it, and it turned that I won the election, which was unusual for my area to be, to win as a Republican and I was so young that, I'd knock on doors and people would think I was the paper boy, they didn't, they'd come to the door, they had no idea what to make of me. First I was Republican, then I was so young, and, but it was a great opportunity, I got to represent my hometown of Lynnfield and Wakefield where I've lived for thirty-something years. So a really good experience.

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Allison: Now what made you, what how did you become a Republican?

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Tisei: Well, you know, when I was in high school, it was really I want to say the times in general. Reagan was the, Jimmy Carter was the President, and a lot of people felt as though the country, there was great sense of malaise in the country and I really believed in a lot of what Reagan said and stood for, particularly on the foreign policy end, and my family, where they weren't political, my parents weren't even registered voters, but they were small business owners.

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Allison: What kind of business?

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Tisei: My father was a contractor, and we were originally from Somerville, and moved out to Lynnfield, and he was a second generation immigrant, immigrant family, both my mother and my father, so the American Dream and the small business aspect of it is really what is, you know sometimes I've scratched my head and said how am I still a Republican? But that's really what makes me feel, put me where I am philosophically.

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Allison: But then you got along with, what was the Republican Party like in the House when you entered? You said the Democrats were split, they were going through this big fight--

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Tisei: The Republicans, the Minority Leader was Bill Robinson from Melrose who was next, the district next door to me. The Republicans were pretty small and represented, I was the closest to Boston, but most of them were from the Cape or western Mass and actually throughout my

career I was the only Republican in the 128 beltway that was elected for, and the closest to Boston so I always looked at things probably a little differently than the caucus as a whole. I served with some great people. The toughest part of my tenure was, the Minority Leader was a great guy and I really liked him, he was a tremendous orator, Steve Pierce, but when the 1990 election came, you know the 'Mass Miracle' had deflated, and it was a, I decided to support Bill Weld, who nobody knew, and I was the only House member that didn't support the Minority Leader, I supported Bill Weld instead, and it turned out I was right which was great but it was a hard year, you know being in there but, and then I went to the Senate in 1990.

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Allison: Okay. What can you tell us, I mean you mentioned the national scene and all, what can you tell us about the state of things in Massachusetts when you entered public life, what the, you mentioned the Massachusetts Miracle evaporating, what were the 80's like?

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Tisei: Obviously the rules reform was the biggest, that was 1984, that was a huge issue, it was in every district and the House did become more democratic. I think Speaker Keavarian did an excellent job. He was in for 6 years and really democratized the House. I think if you look at the records you'll find though that there were more roll calls particularly in the first four years of his speakership than probably though, 10 years prior, and a lot of the members felt very empowered. You had the presidential election in 1988 and a lot of, I just remember that it was amazing because everybody thought the state was in good shape and we got through the election and then all of a sudden it was like well we're not in as good of shape and--

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Allison: We also thought that the governor was going to become president.

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Tisei: --and we thought the governor was going to be president, and you know he was the home state governor, and I can see people didn't want to accentuate certain negative things that were happening and, but after the election sort of everything happened. There was, I have never, in the whole time I was in, I probably went through three bad fiscal crises. That one was really bad and what made it so bad was that everybody had been told how great the state was so there was a lot of anger that went with it. But at the time, people I think payed attention to government more than they pay attention today. And I remember there was a lineup on the radio, it was the Gene Burns show, the Jerry Williams show, there was and it just and when we got to the point where we had to make some pretty serious cuts and deal with the problem that we were having, I just remember the amount of people that were calling in, it was phenomenal. I've never seen the whole time in the building, 26 years, I had never seen anything like it, and I remember back then there were no cell phones or internet but they had the phones where you could press all the buttons, and I just remember, and all the reps were, I was in government regulations, Bill Galvin's committee, he was the chair. And I just remember looking at the receptionist day after day with all the phone lines lit up, because there were 3-4 reps in there, and it just never let up, and that election, after 20 years of a Democratic governor, people were

so upset they elected Bill Weld. And on the Senate end, we went I think from having 7 members to 17 members, and if you go back and look at the statistics from that election season, there were 3 or 4 races that were decided by less than 1000 votes. It could have been the dream of all Republicans to take over the Senate, it was just, people were angry and they wanted change, and I remember the slogan was sort of, 'had enough?' and Bill Weld came into office and I just remember being sort of at the epicenter of the presidential race in 1988 because you had the home state governor running. And of course, the Bush people were looking very closely at what had happened here in Massachusetts and using different examples and nationalizing them, so you had that going on. So that race, I served as Bill Weld's campaign chairman, not only was I supporting him as a member of the caucus, but I chaired his campaign and took him around and introduced him to everybody on the grassroots level. He was a terrible candidate at first, but you know really ended up getting it and anybody who knows Bill knows he's a great guy and very quirky and he ended up doing a really good job and winning. And that was, that fiscal crisis, I was thinking today like of every experience I had in the building, what was the most collaborative experience and Pat McGovern, I was appointed, after the election I was appointed to the Ways and Means committee, and the Senate Ways and Means committee was chaired by Pat McGovern from Lawrence. She was probably one of the senators I respected the most during my tenure, and I remember we sat down, I mean it was such a mess, I want to say like we were, a quarter of the budget had to be either cut or savings had to be found and it was a really dire situation, and she brought everybody in to the Ways and Means committee, and literally I want to say for 4 or 5 days, we as a group, and it wasn't a Democrat or a Republican thing, as a group we went through every single line item in the budget and all worked on a collaborative basis.

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Allison: How many were in the group, how many were in the committee?

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Tisei: It was all the members of the committee, so there had to be 15 or 20 people. I remember Bob Cordy, who was Governor Weld's Chief of Staff, we were all sort of crammed into this room with the long table, and Bob actually ended up being the Chief Justice of the court, but he's a tall guy and he was sort of sitting on the end and he had a big fern right behind him and was sort of on his head and it was kind of funny. But everybody, she said come in and with your suggestions, and we all brought suggestions in and it was of everything, again, that I've seen, it was a really collaborative effort and I think that the fact that everybody was willing to work together is what pulled the state through that time. And then just moving ahead, just a little, we I would say that first 4 years of the Weld administration were probably the most productive period of time and if you look back at what was done during that period of time, in at least modern, the modern history of this state so much happened. You had education reform in 1993, you had welfare reform, you had workers' comp reform, you had, you know the list, besides dealing with the fiscal crisis, the list of things that were accomplished was very impressive.

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Allison: Now what brought you to Weld as opposed to Steve Pierce, I mean how do you make that decision?

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Tisei: I was more of a, again, it was probably from my background and where I'm from. My district, as a whole, I mean I had 11% Republican in my district, and I'm sort of a Republican that believes the government should you know, stay out of the bedroom, stay out of your wallet, get off your back, and more fiscally conservative, socially libertarian. And Bill Weld really represented that type of Republicanism to me, so.

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Allison: Now what, you served in both the House and the Senate, the House during a period when it's going through this democratic transition, and then you're in the Senate, how are the two bodies different?

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Tisei: Well, as the House was really being democratized, the Senate I don't think most people thought, had changed at all. But you know, I remember personally after the election one of the first things I did is I, I took Senator Jack Brennan's spot, and he had been the Assistant Majority Leader and he was a very influential, very smart guy, and he had decided not to run. And I went in to see him and he said, "Oh, you're going to find that being in the House, going to the Senate is like dying and going to heaven." And I was like, "Hmm what do you mean by that?" and it didn't take very long for me to figure it out because what I found, I liked the House but there was something sort of, there was just so many people there and it was the more, you know if you were in a classroom with 160 people as opposed to 40, you know there's obviously differences. But the Senate only having 40 members, I just felt like for myself it was more in tune with the way I could work best and within a very short period of time, just again, going right in having to deal with that fiscal crisis right off the bat, I got more accomplished in the first 6 weeks or first 6 months I was in the Senate than I did 6 years in the House and it was because mainly if you were interested in something, there were only 3 or 4 other people that usually were interested, not 20 or 25 or 30 or 40 like as there would be in the House, and it was easier in the Senate to establish personal relationships with people, to get to know people and find out what they were interested in and you'd have more opportunity to really collaborate with folks. So I would say that that is really the biggest difference, and then just the decorum I think in the Senate, it was a little less rowdy, to this day probably than the House and so I really enjoyed my time in the Senate.

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Allison: How would you characterize the different leaderships you had served under in the Senate or served with or under in the Senate? I mean you were there for a long enough time to see differences in leadership and styles, and the way the body worked, I wonder if you have any thoughts on that?

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Tisei: Well I think like in the legislature as a whole sort of goes through cycles. After Keverian, for as great as he was as opening up the process, it ended up killing him in the end because when the fiscal crisis came, he couldn't really control his members. He had his chairman of Ways and Means and other important committees not even on board with him. He was also running for State Treasurer at the time, which hurt his ability to run, but I would, I think all of the people who I, the Senate Presidents that I served with, and there were 4 of them, all were effective in their own way and they were all, you know there isn't, I mean, Senate President Bulger for instance, people had an opinion, a lot of people would think, 'Well, here's a guy, he ruled with an iron fist,' but he really didn't. There was a lot of debate that took place during his presidency and the thing about him I kind of noticed is that he had two or three things that he wanted, you know, and that he was always striving for, and there'd be all this chaos or other things happening on the floor that would distract people's attention and he would be, he was very successful with pushing his agenda forward. Senator Birmingham was very good to me and he, when people say nowadays, 'Why is Massachusetts among the top states for education?' that Education Reform Act, he was the chair of the Education Committee. But he also as president made sure it was implemented and when he was Ways and Means chair he did a great job with that. He was more centralized I think, obviously than Bulger, and we used to kid around, he had two aides, and they would sit up on the podium with him all the time, and we would call one '41' and one '42'. Because a lot of the aides, the aides were given, he delegated a tremendous amount of power to them. And he ended up running for governor and so we went through a little period that really wasn't directly because of him, but people didn't want to get up and necessarily debate too much because everything was sort of calculated, 'Well how will this affect his campaign?' and so the Senate, there was a period and you had Governor Celluci, and Speaker Finneran, and there was a period where not a lot got done and there didn't seem like there was a lot of oxygen in the room. People would just, and I remember that year we didn't have a state budget until November and there were always summits out on the Senate President's balcony here and on the House side. But I think I, he was in the district next door to me and we got along very well personally and, again, a great guy. And then Senator Travaglini came, and he was more of a, Senator Birmingham was probably more of a policy want, as opposed to President Travaglini, he really, again, empowered the members again. I really liked, and when I was Minority Leader I served with Senator Murray, and I liked the way she handled things in the Senate, and I saw it, I was the Minority Leader at that point and I saw up close what she would deal with on a day to day basis, and we met every week together in her office we would have a weekly meeting and just go over what was going on in the state, what I was planning to do, what she was planning to do, you know I never, at the very beginning we talked and my being the Minority Leader wasn't about embarrassing her, or her me, you know we both had points of view on things, and when you're in the majority, 35-5 when I was the Minority Leader, and other just pretty significant, you it would be very easy for you as the leader to abuse the rules, and to try to push things through and not have a fair process because you have more than enough votes to do whatever you need to do, and she really ran the Senate, and they all did, all 4 of them, but I want to say I saw it more with her, she really ran the Senate in a very open and transparent manner. And I have a great deal of respect for her.

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Allison: What, now what did you hope you could achieve or accomplish as the Minority Leader on when you advanced to a position of leadership?

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Tisei: Well I guess first, I was somebody who always tried to find consensus and I don't really consider myself a partisan, so I would say the first thing upon becoming Minority Leader was to, the thought was to try to somehow shape all the major bills that came through the Senate. And finding the parts of the bill that would sort of coincide with our agenda and push some things forward, and even though we didn't have a lot of members, just preparing for this interview I had talked to a couple of my old aides and I was kind of surprised by how much we did accomplish when you see it all down, so it was pretty good. And the second thing, which was probably my biggest challenge at least at the beginning, was that for 16 years the role of Minority Leader in the Senate and House had been to really carry the governor's agenda forward and to be an advocate for the governor's policies and here we were, and I had served with Dukakis but not in a leadership process and we'd gone all the way, and here we were and Governor Patrick had been elected and sort of coincided with the time I became the Minority Leader, so the role changed somewhat, and it wasn't really what it was before and it was to be the loyal, not only to be the, work to try to get things done, but also to be the opposition or the person who the spokesman for the other side of the argument. And I don't mean the opposition necessarily that you're poking somebody in the eye all the time, but you're offering a different philosophy, a different point of view, and a different way of doing things. And, that was just a jolt to everybody here who had been used to, who have had, who were Republicans who had great relationships with the governor and were advancing his policy, we had to do things on our own. The Minority Leader in the House, Brad Jones, is somebody who started off as an aide to me like years before, and we decided that we were going to be as cooperative and collaborative as possible and that we were going to put out our own agenda at the very beginning and we set up a Republican policy conference and actually put out a brochure, but a plan of literally all, what our agenda was. And we were really focused on affordability and competitiveness and we had a bunch of different proposals and it was a great blueprint for us because as we went through the next year, couple of years, we were always sort of referring back to that, and it was pretty positive in that we let everybody know up front what we stood for, what our principles were, and that hadn't been done before.

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Allison: Good. So you mentioned some of the challenges you faced, what, okay, what surprised you when you got to the State Senate, in particular when you become part of the leadership, was there anything really that surprised you here?

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Tisei: The thing that surprised me about being the Minority Leader was that if you know the rules, the rules of the Senate are really set up to protect the minority and also to make, kind of keep the majority within certain lanes, and if you know the rules of the Senate, you can do a lot as far as, you might not be able to stop something, but you can sort of use them in a way to, when we would walk into the building the ebb and flow of the way the Senate works, as the

Minority Leader you could turn it into a really long day, or it could be a short day or you kind of decide if there are 15 amendments what is the emphasis of the debate going to be about and how is this bill going to end up being reported based on what you decide to highlight off the bill. So you have, even though I didn't have a lot of members, I always felt as though as far as the ebb and flow of the Senate went I had a lot of input into the way things went.

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Allison: That's interesting. Now how would you decide what issues you would prioritize or what, what kind of an agenda you would set, I mean what was that process like?

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Tisei: Well we had that conference report, which was really helpful, but a lot of what we did was reactive. And we didn't, we sort of had a skeleton staff, I had a legal counsel, a issues director, a communications director, we had like 8 people, and literally the president was great about telling us the big things that were probably going to be coming out, but you never knew, I mean you had a calendar every day with things that were put on it, and so a lot of it was reactive that you had to right away figure out, and our role really was to make sure that when something came up that we were sort of the first, the testers in a way. When a bill came out, the majority party needed to defend it, you know, and explain it, and I think it was a good exercise for them too because at the end of the day, you're coming up with a better product and a better piece of legislation that will help, you know, help people, and so we really didn't know from, we knew on the big things, but we didn't have control of the agenda.

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Allison: Right, so it really is a change, I mean and Massachusetts seems to at least we like the idea of a Republican governor or a Democratic, at least that's the way it's been for most of the last, you know 25-30 years. So I'm wondering about how the role changes, you mentioned a little bit about if it's a Republican governor, he sets the agenda for you in the House or in the Senate.

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Tisei: The governor's really got all the resources of the government, all the attorneys, all the people that draft legislation. And as a Republican, he's putting out the agenda and hopefully the legislature's responding to some of it, he's on the bully pulpit every day, and but when you're, and in this state when one party controls everything you're more in a our job really was to bring things out and let, again make people have to explain what they were doing, go through, because if there was anything in, if there was a poison pill in any one of the bills, you know, people would say, "Well how did that get through, where were the watch dogs, why weren't they why didn't they bring this to our attention?" And it was a good, I think it was a good the way we did it, sometimes even when we disagreed to be disagreeable, to disagree without being disagreeable, was sort of the way we went about it. And the members I think on the majority party appreciated the way that we did it. And I want to say, it wasn't just me, Senator Lees before me, Senator Tarr after me, we're sort of all cut from the same cloth as far as the way we deal with people and other members. You know the one thing I think people, and



maybe 50 years from now if people are watching this, they can look back and they'll look back at this as a really tough time to be in government, but most of that is Washington D.C., we never really have had a bad atmosphere here at the State House. Both parties have worked together. There are disagreements and there are fights about things, but we're really not we're still at the point where the members know each other well enough that, at the end of the day, they're talking to each other and it's, and they like each other, and it's nothing like what's taking place down in Washington.

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Allison: How would the, what changes did you see in the legislative process, I mean over the whole course of your tenure, you mentioned a bit about the Kevarian-McGee fight in the House, I'm wondering about other changes in the process during your time here?

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Tisei: I would say, well the years I was Minority Leader, I don't think that there was that much of a change, and again, I think Senator Murray did a great job. I'd just say as a whole I noticed that as a young whippersnapper who came into the House, there were more members of, there were more members who were willing to get up and challenge the leadership on both sides, both Democrat and Republican. You had some representative, I think Weatherbee from Pepperell, Andy Card who ended up being the president's Chief of Staff, and they didn't care. They were just there and they were, so you'd always have like a very lively debate. And I noticed that over time, again, over a 26 year period, you don't necessarily get as much debate. When I started in the House the budget process took at least two weeks. There were two readings of the budget, and we had Royal Switzler who was a Republican member, and he was actually interesting for a number of reasons, but he was his own party, (laughs) it'd drive everybody crazy, but he'd literally went, we'd go through the budget and it would be every single day and every single night and there would be 1000 amendments and 990 were his and every single amendment he would get up and just go on and on and on, and literally, and then that would be second reading, and then you would go to third reading a week later and you'd start all over again and all those same amendments could come up all over again, and it was just a draining experience, and he literally if there were 8 complete days and nights that we did this for, he was responsible for 6 or 7. But now, you look at the way the budget process is done, we have a 40 billion dollar budget and it's done usually and I'm not criticizing people but it's done within a couple of days. The House has changed now that the, most of the debates take place in the side room, that's just a different way to do it, but you go in, they call on everybody who has an education amendment and you'll sort of sort things out, and then come out to the floor and do it, so you don't see the same type of debates on the floor that you would.

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Allison: And that's because of the rules of the House changing or the?

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Tisei: I'm not so sure it's the rules or the, just the way things, a trend that things have gone. Now I want to say the Senate President now, Senator Rosenberg, has sort of gone backwards, a

different, back to sort of the Kevarian model where he's governing by consensus and he's encouraging all the members, particularly the chairs, to play a very much more active role in the legislative process. So again I think things go through cycles, and you start to see and you see things happening here that are great.

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Allison: Now you had a long tenure, so you worked with a number of different governors, speakers, Senate Presidents, I wonder if you could talk a bit about the relationship between the Senate as an institution, the governor, the House, I mean how these three work in the Massachusetts system?

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Tisei: I worked with, I added it up before I came here, 5 governors, no 6 governors, 5 speakers, and 4 Senate Presidents. And it's interesting, it all depends I guess how, when Governor Weld was here for instance, you know a Republican governor is smart to become best friends with the speaker or the Senate President so it seemed as though the, Governor Weld was aligned more with Senate President Bulger and on a lot of his initiatives, and the Senate at that point seemed to be the more conservative of the two branches, so it was just probably more of a natural thing. During Governor Celluci's period of time, the House under Speaker Finneran was the more conservative body and the, Governor Celluci tended to work him I think a little more. So you always are in that situation, I don't know now how you would consider it because I think the governor has a, Governor Baker has a good relationship with both the speaker and the Senate President. But the one time where we didn't have a Republican governor and you had a Democratic governor and a Democratic speaker and Senate President, I was sort of surprised that they didn't necessarily get more accomplished or were able to work closer together. And you had a number of things going on at the time. First, when governors come in, whether they're Democrats or Republicans, there are a lot of them who'd think, they only think that there's one branch of government and they don't really, they think they can rule by decree, and I would say that Governor Patrick came in that way, but so did Governor Romney, and they both had, you know, a tougher time dealing with the legislature. But I think that, in this case you had the speaker pretty much at odds with the governor from the beginning, Governor Patrick from the beginning, and what really I think set it off was obviously there was a huge casino debate here, and the speaker was against it, the governor was for it, and then, my first two years that sparring sort of took place and then there was a cloud over the speaker and the speaker ended up changing my second term as the Minority Leader. So you had a new speaker, and so a lot of, it was a complicated relationship between the speaker and the governor, and the Senate President did her best I think to try to mediate between the two, and sometimes, again, I think it's inherent in whoever the governor is, the governors really don't communicate with the legislative leaders as much as they should and I remember when Governor Dukakis was here, hearing, I don't think he got along well with Senator Bulger or Speaker Kevarian. If it's just, I think a lot of times it isn't necessarily Democrat Republican, it's more institutional and I would tell people that a lot because they'd be like, 'Well what's going on in the Senate, the Democrats are in,' and I said, 'No it doesn't really work like that.' It's more a lot of times it's a rivalry between the House and the Senate's priorities than it is Democrat or Republican.

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Allison: What would your relationship be with the Republicans in the House as Minority Leader in the Senate?

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Tisei: Just, I had an extraordinarily good relationship. As I mentioned, Brad Jones I've known him for thirty-something years, I actually introduced him to his wife, so we had a really good relationship all the way through, and when things would come up, we would pretty much talk I want to say almost every day but a lot of times, you know in the past, that a House Minority Leader and the Senate Minority Leader didn't have that type of relationship. Because it's easy I guess, in a way to, the way things are set up, you have two, the legislature here is much more powerful than it is in most other states and you have power centers and so I can see why it's very easy to get to the point where, and it's usually never the principals, it's usually mostly the staff, and the staff are all looking out for the best interest of their leader, and sometimes they create issues.

00:39:25,800 --> 00:39:34,839

Allison: Bulger just has a story about Governor Weld coming into this office and saying at one point, "Remember, I'm the governor", and Bulger said, "Don't start that with me."

00:39:34,839 --> 00:39:41,200

Tisei: You know, they got, I think I remember at one point, did he tell you they got caught in an elevator together?

00:39:41,200 --> 00:39:42,200

Allison: No.

00:39:42,200 --> 00:39:48,560

Tisei: They were, I guess, that's when they started talking really, but that elevator near the governor's office,

00:39:48,900 --> 00:39:51,700

Allison: Because Weld had actually run against him when he was running for governor.

00:39:51,700 --> 00:40:12,390

Tisei: Yeah, I was very much a part of that because again I ran rules reform for the House, but when I ran for the Senate it was really, the campaign was against Bulger and the fact that the perception was that the Senate had been ruled by an iron fist, and the voters responded. Again, we picked up 17 seats.

00:40:12,920 --> 00:40:17,140

Allison: So then how was it when you entered the Senate, having then been running against the president?

00:40:17,140 --> 00:42:25,440

Tisei: He was very professional and understanding, and even Weld, he understood, first of all, and then even Weld, right off the bat started working with him because he recognized that he had to get things done, and they started right away with welfare reform, education reform, and it was great, a lot of those things I got to participate in. I was on the conference committee for the Welfare Reform Act, which was really interesting, I was thinking about that on my way in here, that ended up being a national model, we passed a great bill here. And I remember Terry Murray was the chair of the Human Service Committee and Senator Birmingham was Ways and Means, so they were the, we were the three conferees for the Senate, and Tom Finneran was the conferee from the House, and I can't remember who the other two were, but I remember both Finneran and Birmingham, very smart people. Rather than sitting at a table, they were pacing around the room, sort of coming with, we had got to the point where we had 5 or 6 things left and they were all complicated things and, and it was just, they were pacing around the room and one of them I think had either a ball or an apple and they'd throw it to the other one, it was just an interesting way of doing it. I didn't say too much, I was just like wow, this is really, you know, this is historical, and we ended up with a great bill that, and then the education bill, Senator Birmingham, it was Representative Roosevelt in the House and Birmingham in the Senate, but he was really the person I think who stuck with it who was here and who made sure it got implemented. That was signed in my district at the home school and my district benefited in it in so many ways and I had a number of different provisions that I was able to get in the bill. So just being able to work on some of those huge bills was, was exciting. And again they were all done, total spirit of bipartisanship

00:42:26,660 --> 00:42:34,300

Allison: That's great. Can you tell us if there were any significant constitutional convention debates in your tenure?

00:42:34,800 --> 00:42:37,760

Tisei: Well I had the marriage debate.

Allison: Oh right.

00:42:37,760 --> 00:44:13,340

Tisei: Not only was there a constitutional convention, there were like 18 of them and it kept going on and on and on and on, and when I became Minority Leader, that was it, that was the very last one that killed, once the court approved marriage equality there was almost immediately the next day an effort launched to overturn it and they couldn't do it as an initiative petition, they needed to do it as a constitutional convention and when you change the constitution you need one sitting group of the legislature, 25% of the people to vote for it, and then an election, and then in the next sitting group in the legislature to vote for it, then it goes on the ballot. So it had passed the first time, and the second time that's when we, then I became the Minority Leader and we had that convention and it ended up killing it. And it was a good thing, of everything I tell people, 26 years I was a pack rat, and I probably had hundreds of boxes of stuff, and especially when I became the Minority Leader we kept everything. But I

threw everything away, I gave Bruce, Senator Tarr, what he wanted and then I threw everything away. The only thing I kept really was everything from the constitutional conventions, and I have 6 or 7 boxes, big boxes, in my basement with all the correspondence, all of just everything that was going on during those period of times, so one day you can read my book.

00:44:13,340 --> 00:44:15,460

Allison: The state archives I'm sure would be interested.

00:44:15,460 --> 00:45:19,820

Tisei: Or the archives, I'll donate it to the archives, but I can't think of an issue the whole time I was here that, because we were the first in the nation and now people don't really recognize, it's, it is a normal thing right? But from the day, again the court came out, all the way through it was a battle, all the way through and it was, and I think it showed the very best of what Massachusetts is all about and what the Massachusetts legislature is all about, and when you go into the House Chamber and look up at all the names around the Chamber, where the constitutional conventions took place you see so many famous people who have been involved in Massachusetts and who have been really civil rights leaders, and that's always been what we've been about as a state and this was just the, probably the most significant, most recent chapter of that.

00:45:20,060 --> 00:45:21,580

Allison: And are you writing a book about it?

00:45:21,589 --> 00:48:09,640

Tisei: Maybe one day I will, but I have all my source material, so, literally thousands and thousands of letters. It was the one issue that lit thousands, I mean a thousand times more than anything else that ever came up here, any tax increase, any, because everybody just was so engaged, and I've got to say, at the beginning the call, when the court came out and said marriage, they gave the legislature a time period to do it, people were pretty stunned, and the calls that were coming in had to be 20-1 against, and they weren't just, 'Oh I'm against this,' they were like, 'How dare you change the meaning of marriage.' Every church was super engaged in this, and I remember that I had went to an event that night with a very progressive legislator who, and we were both asked about it, and I said, "I support the court," and he said, "I support civil unions, I can't support." He ended up coming on board, but it was just such a reach for so many people. So we had that first constitutional convention and we were like, I remember, I went into the, we had a sort of, all there were 200 legislators so you need, what, 50 right? See how good my math is? You needed 51 to stop it. We ended up maybe having like 20 people in the room at the very beginning and we were like, 'This isn't going to,' but over time, over a 4 year period or a 5 year period, by the time that second convention had come, it was literally 100 and whatever, we ended up with almost, we had totally turned it around, and it was by just people getting comfortable, and some of the people who were involved like showed a lot of leadership. Senate President was excellent here, Senator Murray. The day of that constitutional convention she was probably at her best, because I think, and you can probably ask her, but the speaker got a little nervous because he didn't know for sure that he would have

the votes, all the votes that he needed, and had called her to talk about maybe cancelling or postponing the convention, and she was, I was there with her at the time, and she was like, 'Nope, we're going right on', and then we really didn't know how it would turn out and it turned out really well.

00:48:09,640 --> 00:48:20,260

Allison: Now were there any political repercussions for you? I mean, you said people get used to the idea, it was a very contentious issue, but it seems to have calmed down.

00:48:20,260 --> 00:51:10,120

Tisei: Yeah it was, I mean there were people who, it was a funny thing because people who had, especially me being a Republican, people who had supported me for twenty-something years had a problem. Certain ones, and every member with whatever their affiliation would tell you you couldn't go into the supermarket and walk down the aisle without somebody approaching you. But no, at the end of the day I picked up a lot, I probably picked up more people than I lost. Even nowadays, a lot of people felt very strongly about it for religious reasons and you have to respect that. And I notice that nowadays, when certain issues come up, even when they're looking back at people and they're saying, 'Oh well you were against marriage equality', well I mean people have evolved. And again they have, a lot of people have legitimate reasons for feeling the way that they did. The issue that came up after that ended up sort of dogging me was that there was a bill after the marriage equality debate that came up that was the transgendered rights bill. And I was called and asked to co-sponsor the bill and at first I was like, "Mmm, I'm going to support it, but I don't know if I want to be a co-sponsor." I was the Minority Leader at that point, I was the highest ranking Republican elected in the state. And I went back home that night and I was out with some of my friends who were, worked in this building, who were Democrats and they said, I said, 'You know I was asked to co-sponsor this bill,' and they were like, "Mmm you shouldn't do that, it's a hot potato." I started thinking about it and I got up the next morning and I said I have to support that bill because at the end of the day it was the same issue, you know people being treated fairly under the law and I felt as though, that I was in a position of leadership, especially in the Republican Party, and that I should be a co-sponsor of the bill. So I called up the group, the individual who called me, and said, "Sure, I'll do it," never thinking that a year later I would be running for Lieutenant Governor. And it became a focal point of or an irritant for Charlie Baker during his first campaign because he didn't, I don't think he supported the law at that point and I did. But when I would go to these local grassroots delegate selection meetings across the state that would, somebody would inevitably always get up and have a problem with that, so. But at the end of the day, again as time goes on, I feel as though that I was on the right side of the issue.

00:51:10,120 --> 00:51:10,640

Allison: Okay.

00:51:10,640 --> 00:51:15,240

Tisei: In true Massachusetts tradition.

00:51:16,820 --> 00:51:21,130

Allison: How did you decide to run for statewide office and what was that process like?

00:51:21,400 --> 00:52:59,549

Tisei: That was almost, I knew after 26 years, how many budgets can you do? (laughs) After 26 budget debates I, and you know we were, we haven't even talked about the Great Recession happened during the time I was the Minority Leader, that was the hardest one. But after 26 rules debates, I knew I was sort of getting to the end of, and I had chaired Bill Weld's campaign when he ran for governor in 1990. So when Charlie Baker decided to run, he called me up and asked me to chair his campaign. And I said, and I had known Charlie for twenty-something years, and I said sure and got very involved and I really do believe that I felt very strongly that he would just be a tremendous governor knowing his management style and values. So I ended up, we would have a meeting, so I ended up chairing the campaign for the first 6 months, and we would have a meeting every Friday and talk about who a good running mate would be for him. And names would come up and we would sort of vet them, there was like 5 or 6 of us sitting around. And one Friday I missed the meeting and I had breakfast with Charlie the following Tuesday and he said, "You're not going to believe this, but we found the person", and sure enough it was me. And I said no, and then I thought about it, you know over the course of a couple of months, and thought you know what, this is, I really, if I believed in him, which I did, and I knew it was the right time to leave that it was worth it to do. So that's how I ended up, I had no desire to ever run for statewide office but I ended up doing it.

00:52:59,820 --> 00:53:01,640

Allison: Yeah, you missed the meeting, so you were asked.

00:53:02,060 --> 00:53:23,240

Tisei: I felt like, what was it? I think Dick Cheney did it that way but it was, it was a good experience and I think Charlie's, the way Charlie's conducted himself in office is exactly why I wanted to do what I can to help him on his road to elective office.

00:53:23,980 --> 00:53:28,880

Allison: How would you characterize the relationship you might have had with the media during your time in public office?

00:53:28,880 --> 00:54:21,739

Tisei: The media was great, again, they understood what, the whole time I was in office, 26 years, I never had a problem with the media. Maybe like a local reporter here or there, but I mean it's, the Boston press they were always good to deal with. I think I was always upfront and honest with them and they appreciated that. When I became the Minority Leader I did a lot of press, obviously, because anything that the governor did, they would want a reaction from somebody and would call, and I would always try to make myself available because I felt as though, if it were something I disagreed with him on that the other side needed to be heard. And had no issues at all my whole time. I'm probably one of the only people that can say that. No scars from the press during my tenure.

00:54:22,320 --> 00:54:32,359

Allison: You've talked a little bit about the role of your staff. I wonder if you could elaborate a bit more. What is the role of the staff of a senator or representative or a Minority Leader?

00:54:33,220 --> 00:56:43,969

Tisei: Well, it's a little different I mean, the staff of a senator, you usually have 4 or 5 people and everybody, you usually have a press person, a legislative person. The Minority Leader's office, I tried to find, I always was very fortunate that I really found good people that were really dedicated, they weren't here just as a job. This was much more than that to them. My Chief of Staff was with me 20 out of the 26. She left to have kids and I'd call her every couple of months to come back and I finally got her back. I had a really good legal counsel and that's what you really need as the Minority Leader because anything that came out, I needed somebody to read through. I'm not an attorney. But I needed somebody to read through the legalese to see if there was anything in there or what the, you know a lot of times it wasn't even somebody sticking something in a bill to try to slide it through, it was the people who were drafting it on the other side had no, hadn't thought through a certain consequence of what a bill would be. So I needed somebody really good who did that, I needed a really good issues person who could sort of dive into things and when things came up I had a pretty good, my sort of background was I was interested in human services, housing, issues like that. But when issues would come up where we didn't sort of have expertise, I was lucky I had Senator Tarr. He's an expert in everything. But we'd also go out and find experts and bring them in and try to work with the leadership on the majority party to say, "Hey, did you realize that you were going to do this when you put together the bill?" And a lot of times we were able to do things behind the scenes that people really, again mold bills and help shape them without even doing it on the floor just by pointing certain things out which was, which we found to be pretty effective.

00:56:43,969 --> 00:56:54,700

Allison: Good. Can you, I wonder what you would say is your biggest accomplishment in your years in the legislature and in the State Senate?

00:56:56,180 --> 00:57:16,339

Tisei: I was thinking about this, and, first of all I was involved in a lot of bills, like I mentioned the education bill and the welfare reform bill. I wrote the bill to create Zoo New England, that was one of the first things I did in the Senate. I was involved in different pieces of legislature.

00:57:16,340 --> 00:57:18,520

Allison: Zoo New England had been, they were two separate entities?

00:57:18,520 --> 01:01:14,819

Tisei: They were two separate, the zoos were run by the state of Massachusetts, which did a good job running both Franklin Park and Stoneham into the ground and what we did was during that, when we'd all sit around the table with Senator McGovern, right when Bill Weld became governor, I said, "We've got to do this differently." We actually wrote a bill to create a public-



private partnership where technically the zoo is owned by the state, but it's a private company that's actually running the facility on a day to day basis. If you wanted to give the zoo ten million dollars prior to the bill passing, you would have to make out the check 'Commonwealth of Massachusetts General Fund' and hope that somehow it found its way to where it was supposed to go. Now as a result of the bill, you can give directly to the zoo and it's really helped them build up a strong infrastructure. But I mean I worked on all kinds of stuff like that and the thing I guess I would consider my biggest accomplishment, and it's going to sound corny but I don't know if you've ever watched the movie, It's A Wonderful Life, and George Bailey gets the opportunity to see the way the world would be if he wasn't there, and for me, even though I was involved and I really loved all the policy stuff and I got to serve as Minority Leader, at the end of the day, what really made me tick was being able to help people who had problems. And it was sort of one of those things where I put so much emphasis into it. I had a district office that I raised money for myself and I had two aides there and literally, it's like once word got out that we would, that there was somebody you could call back, somebody would call you back if you had a problem, we ended up not only within my district, but all over the place, we did a lot of DMH, developmental disability, parents who needed services for their kids, and that used to be the stuff that I could go to, you know, the legislative process is very frustrating. You could have the best idea in the world and file it and fight for it and no matter what the merits are, just, it's set up for a lot of things not to pass. But, if you could get somebody into a nursing home or get somebody who's really on the edge's kid into a group home, those were the things that, and I was at a wake Friday night and a woman came up to me, and it was one of my former aides who had passed away who had worked in my district office, came up to me and said, "You don't know who I am, but I just want to let you know that I must've called 20 different agencies and departments and I wasn't asking for anything, I was just asking for what services were available. I just needed direction. I wasn't asking for somebody to take me on and do everything and I called your office and you were the only office that called back out of everybody I called. And not only did you call back, but you did boom boom boom boom boom." I had never seen this woman before, I have no, I remember a lot of the cases, I don't remember her particular case, but I know that if we hadn't been around, her life would've taken a different course. So that's what really I would hope that, I notice that like, especially being around for a long time, you can be a great, you can solve a fiscal crisis but inevitably there's going to be another one. And I was around for three education reforms, you fix education, need to be, you know. And a lot of that stuff just keeps going over and over, but I think my legacy, I would, is really within, like I would think hopefully hundreds of people whose life got turned in a different direction by what we were able to do. And it wasn't just me, I had really good staff that was able to do it.

01:01:15,420 --> 01:01:17,200

Allison: It's very much like Joe Moakley's story.

01:01:17,200 --> 01:03:55,940

Tisei: Yeah and that's what government should be about. And if there's just one other thing I can just say, the time that I was Minority Leader, and a lot of times when I served in the Senate, I also tried to do something else, and that something else initially started off with being a real estate agent and then I ended up buying my company. And when, and I was thinking for this

interview, like what was the major thing that happened during the four years I was here and it had to be the Great Recession. And the thing about that that made, that really is so etched in my mind that's really, that changed the way I think, it changed a lot, a lot of people's lives, but it changed me a lot because I had a company. Part of the Great Recession was centered around real estate, really, and so I would be here during the day and then I'd go home and one of my agents at my real estate office would call me and say, "I'm going over to so-and-so's house, can you come with me?" And so we'd go over and spend an hour talking to the person who was about to lose their home. You know, saying, "Well we could do a short sale or you're under foreclosure", you know, and then you'd come in here and deal with what was going on in the economy. You know the revenues went right down here and all of a sudden people recognized. I mean that was a really scary time and it made me realize just how being involved, doing something else out of the building kept my feet on the ground all the time and kept me I think in a good spot as far as to having empathy and understanding what was going on in the real world, but that experience really did more than anything else, and it really made me realize that politics, I guess I could've tried to score points here and there and whatever, but I went right in when this happened to the Senate President, and it happened when the legislature wasn't in session if you remember. It was, the stock market crash, I think it was it had to be in October. It was before the presidential election, but we weren't in session here. So I remember talking to the president saying, "What do we do?" and it wasn't, again, a Democrat Republican thing, it was like all hands on deck because this is really serious and people are really getting hurt by it. And I think that the legislature really responded well, both in the House, the Senate, you know everybody worked together to make sure.

01:03:55,940 --> 01:03:58,320

Allison: Now what kind of a response was it, do you recall?

01:03:58,320 --> 01:05:07,900

Tisei: Oh, I mean there had to be a lot of, there were cuts that had a, real cuts, like we had gone through a period of time where people were always talking about the new program they were going to set up or the extra money that was going to go into this program, and this was more, all of a sudden, everybody was in the mindset of, 'Can we save this or can we save that?' And you know what was funny about it is even though it impacted people a lot more, it wasn't, I think the public understood that there were going to be really tough decisions made at the State House so we heard from a lot of people, but nowhere near the number of people I heard from in 1988 and 1990, not even close. So I don't know if people accepted the fact that, 'Boy, you know, things are going to, they have to do something because everything's so bad.' Or you don't have as much civic engagement as you did before. I don't know what the right answer was, but they gave, we got a lot of space to be able to maneuver and try to restructure government and do the things that needed to be done to get through it and everybody I think did a good job.

01:05:08,420 --> 01:05:19,100

Allison: Maybe '88 came too at the end of kind of a period of prosperity where we weren't thinking of this, whereas this one was after we've had several of these economic crises which were in recent memory.

01:05:19,100 --> 01:05:23,000

Tisei: That was the whopper, though. That's a tough one.

01:05:24,040 --> 01:05:27,680

Allison: Yeah. What would be your biggest regret or disappointment in your?

01:05:30,120 --> 01:06:25,180

Tisei: I would probably say that I never got to serve in the majority. Or that even those two, and I think the reason why that first couple of years of Weld's tenure was so successful was he did have enough senators to sustain a veto and the whole dynamic changed and he had something that you could deal with. Because ultimately, if something got vetoed he could sustain it. So it would've been great when I was the Minority Leader to have enough, well it wouldn't have mattered, right? Because we were working with Governor Patrick on something. But just, to have that experience. And I did end up running for Congress at one point and the whole, I guess, there are so many reasons not to do it, but the reason that really made me want to do it was just to have the whole opportunity to serve--

01:06:25,340 --> 01:06:27,400

Allison: --in the majority.

Tisei: --as part of the majority, yeah.

01:06:27,400 --> 01:06:41,140

Allison: Why do you suppose Republicans have trouble getting elected? I mean you said your district was 10% Republican, 11% Republican and you were able to. Why do Republicans have trouble getting elected to the State Legislature or to the State Senate in Massachusetts?

01:06:41,700 --> 01:08:07,760

Tisei: I think at this point it's the brand. The national brand, you know. But the reason why the governor always does well is because people I think do recognize that it's important to have checks and balances. And the reason why we've had such a string of Republican governors. But for some reason, I guess they're able to focus in on the individual running for governor enough, but in some of the other lower offices, not so much. And if you see a D and an R on the ballot, and you don't know either of them, you're going to go with what you're more comfortable with. In order to run as a Republican, your force of personality and your, you need to be pretty well known in your district. Republicans tend to go into the private sector more than the public sector, you know, I've noticed that. And even the ones who came in during the time I was around, who were young and who could be potentially leaders down the road end up getting lured away into the private sector and other things. To be honest, if I hadn't had a private sector job while I was doing this, there's no way that I would've been able to stay as long as I did.

01:08:07,760 --> 01:08:15,540

Allison: Okay. Now what advice would you give to people looking to become leaders in the Legislature?

01:08:16,180 --> 01:09:41,500

Tisei: I guess the one big takeaway is always treat other people the way you want to be treated yourself and don't go around poking people in the eye. And the bottom line is, is that especially given the nature of the way this is set up, is that you can get into very heated and emotional debates with somebody and you're thinking, you know, in the back of your mind, what an unreasonable person, but at the end of the day, the next day, another issue's going to come up where that person's going to be your ally. So don't burn your bridges and make sure that you always again if you treat people right, it always will end up coming back to you. And when you are, nobody will ever question your motives if you treat people with respect. And the great thing, accomplishment I would say, and it wasn't hard because Brian Lees had done it before me and Bruce Tarr did it after, is I always tried to make it so, because the minority can, plays an important role in helping create the atmosphere and we always had a great atmosphere here in the Senate. The people would want to come to work and want to work together, and I think it's a testament to all the people who have served.

01:09:41,500 --> 01:09:44,960

Allison: Alright, thank you. Anything you'd like to add, any?

01:09:44,980 --> 01:09:46,900

Tisei: No that was pretty extensive. So,

01:09:46,900 --> 01:09:47,900

Allison: This was very good, very good.

01:09:47,900 --> 01:10:18,900

Tisei: I had a great experience and not that many people ever get to be able to serve. So I, every day I came in, especially doing the other job, again it would keep my feet on the ground, but every day I came in here I came in here with a total appreciation that it wasn't going to be a lifelong thing, that it was something that not very many people ever get to do and that the time that I was here, I really wanted to take advantage in the best way I could.

01:10:20,920 --> 01:10:21,420

Allison: Well thank you.

01:10:21,420 --> 01:10:22,080

Tisei: Thank you, Thank you.