

PRESS ADVISORY
For Immediate Release

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VIDEOS SHOW HOW SCANDALS LED TO HISTORIC REFORMS

Sixteen video recordings of interviews with leaders involved in historic Rhode Island reforms are now available on YouTube. Former legislators, legislative staff, attorneys general, members and staff of the Ethics Commission, citizen advocates, a retired Supreme Court justice, and a law school dean share their recollections of scandals and reforms.

Most were interviewed by H. Philip West Jr., author of *SECRETS & SCANDALS: Reforming Rhode Island, 1986-2006*, during classes of the Lifelong Learning Collaborative at Temple Beth El in Providence. None were rehearsed or edited.

“Leaders I interviewed for the book have died,” West said. “We needed to capture these memories on video while we could. Several members of the class held positions in government during those crucial years. Many asked good questions.”

Arlene Violet, the first female attorney general elected in the United States, tells of hiring retired banker Robert Stitt for one dollar per year to investigate risky behavior in the Rhode Island Share and Deposit Indemnity Corporation (RISDIC). In 1986, House leaders rejected Stitt’s confidential report. Gov. Edward DiPrete received five explicit warnings but failed to address the looming crisis.

Former Cumberland Representative Frank Gaschen describes the defeat of his 1986 legislation that would have required RISDIC-insured credit unions to get federal insurance. Five years later, RISDIC’s collapse froze more than 300,000 savings and checking accounts. Gaschen served on the commission that investigated the failure of government oversight. In separate interviews, former Attorney General James O’Neil and his deputy, J. Richard Ratcliffe, reflect on the RISDIC and DiPrete investigations.

Former Providence Senator Myrth York describes her legislation that established Rhode Island’s Revolving Door Law, protected citizens against SLAPP-suits, and established merit selection of all state judges. She first raised the question of ending legislative involvement in powerful boards and commissions during her 1994 campaign for governor. York ran three times for governor but did not win.

Three other interviewees discuss the decade-long struggle for constitutional separation of powers. Former Supreme Court Justice Robert G. Flanders describes sharp differences within the high court and his dissent from the 1999 opinion that Rhode Island was a “quintessential system of parliamentary supremacy.” Former Rep. Nicholas Gorham rehearses battles that placed a bipartisan Separation of

Powers amendment before state voters five years later. Michael R. Egan, who served as counsel to the House Separation of Powers Committee, outlines the challenges of rebuilding more than seventy boards to comply with the 2004 amendment.

Long-time State Court Administrator Robert Harrell discusses what he saw of scandals in the courthouse. Roger Williams Law School Dean Michael J. Yelnosky reflects a 1994 constitutional amendment that dramatically opened the process of choosing judges but failed to eliminate politics.

Class member Melvin L. Zurier, who served as chairperson of the Rhode Island Ethics Commission during a tumultuous crisis, shares his recollections of that struggle. Senior staff attorney Jason Gramitt describes his efforts to prosecute former Senate President William V. Irons. In 2009, the Supreme Court immunized state senators and representatives from prosecution by the Ethics Commission. Last November, state voters approved Question 2, which restored the commission's power to deal with lawmakers' conflicts of interest.

M. Charles Bakst, who spent more than forty years as a reporter and then political columnist for the Providence Journal, described the strengths of individual reporters who investigated and wrote about wrong-doing. He also discussed changes in the newspaper business in the Internet age.

Leaders of citizen advocacy groups shared their insights. Margaret Kane of Operation Clean Government, Jane Koster from the League of Women Voters, and John Marion, executive director of Common Cause Rhode Island, also participated.

Dave Hansen, who led in organizing the fall 2015 and 2016 Lifelong Learning Collaborative classes noted that the interview format allowed participants to touch history.

The Lifelong Learning Collaborative is an independent, not-for-profit, peer-run, adult continuing education organization in Providence. Its model is collaborative learning, where peer coordinators develop the syllabus and facilitate class sessions.

INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

RECORDED

YOUTUBE LINK

Arlene Violet and Jeff Newman

10/07/2015

<https://youtu.be/OLZ8tlG9eoM> <<https://youtu.be/OLZ8tlG9eoM>>

Frank Gaschen and Clinton Remington

10/07/2016

<https://youtu.be/mKZHPuMqtJA> <<https://youtu.be/mKZHPuMqtJA>>

Richard Ratcliffe

09/30/2015

<https://youtu.be/t0ufODqNdCc> <<https://youtu.be/t0ufODqNdCc>>

James O'Neil

09/23/2016

<https://youtu.be/DOg0i3TOcFg> <<https://youtu.be/DOg0i3TOcFg>>

Michael Yelnosky

09/30/2016

https://youtu.be/0C15FM_zT4s <https://youtu.be/0C15FM_zT4s>

Robert Harrell

10/14/2015

<https://youtu.be/wRQLLGdAKWs> <<https://youtu.be/wRQLLGdAKWs>>

Myrth York

10/21/2015

<https://youtu.be/NR1wN6EETUU> <<https://youtu.be/NR1wN6EETUU>>

Robert Flanders

10/14/2016

<https://youtu.be/7uBX8JUJjiU> <<https://youtu.be/7uBX8JUJjiU>>

Nick Gorham

10/28/2015

<https://youtu.be/43Gzl8tfqmw> <<https://youtu.be/43Gzl8tfqmw>>

Michael Egan

10/21/2016

<https://youtu.be/3P-aqsOsHFw> <<https://youtu.be/3P-aqsOsHFw>>

Jason Gramitt

11/04/2015

https://youtu.be/D9F_w6xFEgo <https://youtu.be/D9F_w6xFEgo>

Mel Zurier

11/04/2015

<https://youtu.be/ThD1Zp68ho0> <<https://youtu.be/ThD1Zp68ho0>>

Charles Bakst

11/18/2015

<https://youtu.be/X5h0wSBFjbE> <<https://youtu.be/X5h0wSBFjbE>>

Charles Bakst and Dave Hansen

11/04/2016

<https://youtu.be/slzDXPJrR14> <<https://youtu.be/slzDXPJrR14>>

Timothy Murphy

10/28/2016

<https://youtu.be/oil9CQ3gvF8> <<https://youtu.be/oil9CQ3gvF8>>

Margaret Kane and Jane Koster

11/18/2016

<https://youtu.be/MyUyXLW17o4> <<https://youtu.be/MyUyXLW17o4>>