Interview History

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The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Project Detail

The purpose of the Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project is to gather and preserve memories and historical documents of women who have served or are currently serving in the Oklahoma Legislature.

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on November 10, 2006.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Mary Easley is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on November 10, 2009.
Mary Easley – Brief Biography

Mary Easley was born in Cassville, Missouri and has called Oklahoma home since the 1960s. She earned a bachelor’s degree from Friends University and a master’s degree from Northeastern State University. Prior to running for elected office, she taught English in Owasso Public Schools for twenty-seven years.

Easley was elected to the Oklahoma House of Representatives in 1996 for District 78 and in 2004 she was elected to the Oklahoma Senate for District 18. At the time she was elected to the House, her son was also serving making them the first mother and son to concurrently serve in the legislature.


Easley and her husband, Truman, have three children.
Today is November 10, 2009. My name is Tanya Finchum. I’m with Oklahoma State University Library and I’m conducting an oral history project called “Women of the Oklahoma Legislature.” Today I’m with Senator Mary Easley. She was elected to the House in 1996 and then elected to the Senate in 2004 and will term out in 2010.

That’s right.

Thank you for having me today. We’ll get started by having you tell us a little bit about your childhood, where you were born.

It’s always fun to talk about my childhood. I had a sort of Norman Rockwell experience, I believe, because I grew up in a small rural southeast community in Missouri with many aunts, uncles, and a host of cousins. We spent a lot of time together. Living on the farm, playing in the streams with my cousins and my neighbors and friends, and just enjoying life.

What did your parents do for a living?

My parents were farmers so I had a lot of pets. In fact, my father named each cow in his dairy herd. I remember some of their names even today. There was Prince, Princess, Queenie. I enjoy thinking about the past and what it was like for me as a child.

How did you come to be in Oklahoma?

As a result of my husband changing positions and jobs, we moved to Tulsa. When we first married, we lived in Wichita, Kansas, where he was employed with Boeing Aircraft. That is where I finished my education, at Friends University, just following him around. We eventually came to Oklahoma where he is currently employed with
American Airlines.

**Finchum** *And what is your educational background?*

**Easley** My parents always planned for me to go to college. I attended Southwest Baptist College. When I married and moved to Wichita I attended friends University where I finished an undergraduate degree and started a master’s program. I worked on my master’s for approximately a year while teaching and attending school nights and summers. [Then I] went to Wichita State. My first teaching position was in Valley Center, Kansas. It was a wonderful experience. I loved the community. Many families had some of the same values that I did growing up and were very welcoming. When I left there, I cried. I thought Oklahoma was not the land of opportunity. (Laughs) But when I got here and met the people and became involved in a school in Owasso, Oklahoma, where I taught twenty-four more years, I found that I really am an Okie.

**Finchum** *When did you move to Oklahoma?*

**Easley** We moved in 1967.

**Finchum** *And you taught English?*

**Easley** I taught English at Owasso High School.

**Finchum** *How did you transition from being an English teacher to a politician?*

**Easley** [Toward the end of my] teaching career, my son Kevin was a senator. I became very impressed with the legislative process [and had a lot of advice for him]. He finally just gave up and decided that I would never understand the process. [I did not understand at the time that it takes much longer to get things done. I was very interested in improving education and providing a better educational experience for our children.]

**Finchum** *Tell us about the moment you decided to run.*

**Easley** I remember the exact moment. We were, as a family, at Grand Lake celebrating a holiday. The topic of politics came up and we were discussing our district. I was preparing a meal and [listening to the discussion]. I thought to myself, I will run for that seat and try to get some legislation passed that I’m very concerned about. [When I found an opportunity] to inject some conversation, I said to my son and the rest of the family, “I’m going to retire from teaching and run for District 78.” There was dead silence. I wasn’t really ready to retire. I loved teaching and I loved my students and the community, the principal, our
administration, and staff. I didn’t have a single complaint.

After a few moments, Kevin looked at me and said, “If you’re going to do that, you will work hard and you will win.” That’s where I started. I didn’t know how [difficult it would be], but always thought I would win. I think there was some doubt in the minds of my husband and my children whether I’d be able to win [in a Republican district with a Republican incumbent]. I believe when you have a passion for something and you’re willing and want to work hard, it can be done.

Finchum

Talk a little bit about your campaign, the first one.

Easley

The first campaign was a real challenge. I thought, I [would] retire [from teaching] and work maybe a couple hours or so a week, campaigning, and still win. It was far from what I had anticipated. Kevin decided we needed a campaign manager and that it would be Bill Wiseman, his campaign manager. He was excellent. He understood our family, he understood our values, and when I met him, I was very impressed. He was a great motivator. Together, we developed a plan and that plan would be that I would walk [door-to-door], not one or two hours a week, but every day! And I would walk that district two or three times so that people would know me and know my issues and I would know them. Actually, the people in House District 78 were people just like us. They had some of the same values that I had and some of the same dreams and hopes for our children: good education, good healthcare. The ability and opportunity to make a good living for their families and some moral issues [were other things] we had in common. It was very easy to represent that district. I still have a great love for those people today.

If I were home having a cup of coffee in the morning and it was nine o’clock, I would get a call. It would be Kevin. He would say, “What are you doing home? You’re supposed to work from nine o’clock until dark every day.” That’s a long day, but I’m quite used to working long days being a teacher. I would say to him, “I’m a retired teacher. I need some time.” However, I would get up and go. I always found it very rewarding to meet with people. I would invariably spend my day, or some afternoon, in someone’s home discussing political issues and having a cup of coffee with them. Those people got to know me and I got to know them. It was a great experience.

Finchum

Did you have a slogan?

Easley

Oh yes. I helped Kevin get his slogan so I took the same one he had: “Easley the Best Choice.” I feel like that’s a good slogan because it’s grammatically correct.
Finchum: And I understand you had a special vehicle?

Easley: Yes. The second term I ran, I decided I needed a point of interest or [something] catchy besides the slogan and the signs I had. I wanted something that would attract attention. I was running against the same gentleman that I ran against the first time. My colors were red and white, so I decided it would be interesting to have a red Volkswagen and call it “Mary’s Votes Wagon.” My husband put together a sign to place on top of the car that spelled out “Mary’s Votes Wagon.” [That little red car caught the attention of] the local news media who came and [did an interview] as I was walking door-to-door. It gave us a lot of free publicity.

Finchum: So you beat the incumbent?

Easley: Again. The first time I think we won 51% to 49%. The second time it was greater. In fact, it was considered a landslide the second time.

Finchum: Talk a little bit about your swearing-in day, the first one.

Easley: When I first came to the Capitol, of course I was very excited. I had won and had challenged an incumbent, a very popular incumbent in Tulsa. I had no idea that anybody else felt the way I felt about it. When I was introduced on the House floor the day of the swearing in, the floor leader introduced me as a ‘giant killer.’

Finchum: That’s a major accomplishment. The opposite party, opposite gender, and an incumbent.

Easley: That’s true. District 78 was several percentage points more Republican than [Democrat]. I had to overcome many obstacles, and part of it was just friendly persuasion at the door.

Finchum: And it was the first time a mother and son had served...

Easley: Together. Yes. I think a mother and son had been here before, but not one in each chamber. I was in the House and Kevin was in the Senate. So that was kind of unique.

Finchum: Did you live here or commute?

Easley: [The legislature is in session] the first of February until the end of May. I stayed [at the Grandison], a bed and breakfast at Thirteenth and Shartel. Those people became my family away from home. I got to know their children and their extended families. I love them. They’ve been very kind to me during the time that I’ve stayed with them.
And do you drive down Lincoln to get here or...

Yes. I’m very impressive and romantic, I guess you could say, because when I see the Capitol, I envision those people who served before me and I think about the reason I’m here. What a blessing it is for me to [serve in the legislature] after already having a career that I enjoyed more than anything.

When I come down Lincoln Boulevard, I see the Capitol and think about the people who served here before me. The people who were real statesmen are the ones you remember, not the people who’ve given their life to politics. I think about Henry Bellmon. He went against party lines to support education with House Bill 1017, which helped me (I was a teacher at the time he started that bill). And I appreciated that. He once made the statement, “Politics is what you do before you’re elected. After you’re elected, you govern.” I have often thought about that. There have been many people in the past that have talked to me about what it’s like to serve in the legislature and it’s those people that I remember.

Another gentleman who helped me when I first started was [Tommy Frasier, a Tulsa] attorney. He was disabled from a military injury. He was a good supporter of good ideas. When I decided to run, I went to his office for a donation. I got more than I asked for. He gave me my first donation, but he also opened his desk and he pulled out a little leather-bound book. It was a copy of the Constitution, federal and the state. He handed it to me and said, “I’m giving you this, I want you to read it all and I want you to practice it.” I did read it, but it’s not much fun reading the Constitution. I think I’ve read bits and pieces before but reading it with a different agenda was very enlightening.

Can you talk a little bit about the first bill you introduced on the floor?

I don’t recall the first bill. However, Kevin and I did one together. It was quite a challenge. I remember I had to do a long debate on the bill. At that time we went late into the evening and one late evening [I was attempting] to persuade different representatives to my way of thinking about a bill that dealt with teenagers and alcohol. I had just completed what I thought was a pretty good argument and one of the senior members of the House stood up and challenged me, one who was in my own party. He thought he would show the new member how to behave and what it was like to get a bill passed. It was tremendous. He frightened me, he belittled me, and, as was his practice, he humiliated me. I was very concerned that my bill wouldn’t pass. When he finished his part of the debate I stood up and [looked around to see something happening] in the back [of the chamber]. My son had come over from the Senate. He had taken this gentleman to task about his method of
debating against his mother’s bill. I’ll never forget it. I got the bill passed and it went to the Senate and Kevin passed it there. So we had our first Easley and Easley bill.

**Finchum**

*At one point you decided to switch chambers from the House to the Senate. How did that come about?*

**Easley**

I had no intention of leaving my district until term limits. I loved the House. I loved serving in the House. I had good experiences there. I served as the Banking Chairman which gave me an opportunity to work with the predatory lenders. At that time predatory lenders, as I called them, were coming into the state of Oklahoma. We had passed a bill that would allow them to operate in a way that I believed would be extremely difficult for people who were struggling to make ends meet. I wanted to stop the high interest rates. I wanted to work on that. I wanted to stop them coming into the state. I thought I could do that being chair, but faced some challenges, nonetheless.

Kevin decided, due to term limits, he would pursue another career. With the excuse he needed help, he took me out into the district. We went to chamber meetings and all kinds of meetings in his district, going all over Mayes County, all over Wagoner County. He [felt I needed to] meet those people and see the need to support them and represent them in the same way he had. When it came time for him to leave, he talked to me about running for the Senate. I decided I would do it, not because I thought it was a stepping stone. That was not the reason I came to the Senate. I came to the Senate because I had a passion to help people and felt I could represent them well.

**Finchum**

*Was it different campaigning for the two?*

**Easley**

We tried the very same methods. Door-to-door, that was my way to campaign. That was my way to know people. I found it almost impossible to go to every small town, every community, and knock every door. I became somewhat disillusioned and discouraged with that because there wasn’t time. It was impossible to walk that district two times as I had done in my House district. I had a challenge before me [because Senate districts are much larger than House districts]. We tried to keep it personal. We tried to meet the people by attending every event possible to discuss [their issues and concerns]. I tried to do some of the things that Kevin had started because the people of that district had elected him three times and they liked his ideas. They liked him so I was going to try to carry on his dreams for them.

**Finchum**

*Did you have an opponent each time?*
Easley

I had an opponent every time. If I ran again, I would have an opponent. We know that ahead of time. Kevin always had an opponent. We’ve always had opponents and we always will. And I suppose that’s good government.

Finchum

Did you run against any women?

Easley

All but the third term [my opponents were male]. The third term I ran against a cite counselor’s wife. It was somewhat different, but it’s still basically the same. You represent the people.

Finchum

In the years that you’ve been here, what have been a couple of your favorite bills that you have pushed through?

Easley

It’s hard to go back and think about, [but] I think the bills I’ve worked were in education. I’ve had some bills—it’s a little bit tough getting educational bills passed. There are many different ideas about education and how we should provide every child an opportunity to learn. One [very important piece of legislation] which failed last term, is the bill for autistic children. I have a real passion for children with learning disabilities. I would like to see us do more for the autistic child. I passed a bill requiring teachers to get special training [to work with autistic children]. That passed and is now law. It went in effect last year, in fact, and I think it’s working well. There is one in 150 children now diagnosed with autism and there’s no known cure. I’m hoping that will happen soon so we can provide those children with the tools to help them with their struggles with their education.

Also, I sponsored the Autism Insurance Bill along with another senator, but it died due to a lack of hearing in a committee. I’m hoping legislation will be passed soon to provide insurance for those families struggling with an autistic child.

Finchum

What committees have you been a member of?

Easley

I’ve always been a member of the Education Committee [and have served as vice-chair. I was vice-chair of the Energy Committee, as well]. I also served as vice-chair of the Transportation Committee which has been a real experience for me because of all the stimulus dollars that we’ve received. I feel that transportation and our highways and roadways are very necessary for economic development. [I am a member of Public Safety where I have tried session after session to get legislation passes to require training for bouncers in bars and clubs. As I stated before, I was chair of the House Banking Committee where I authored many bills dealing with regulating reverse mortgages and predatory lending. I am still very anxious to see improvements in those
Finchum: Do you have an opinion on term limits?

Easley: Oh yes, I authored a bill which has not been heard for the last two sessions. I do think we are moving to the time when term limits could be overturned; [however, it would take a vote of the people to accomplish that]. Many states [are choosing to overturn their term limits]. In fact, I think two states have decided that it’s unconstitutional. So I’m hopeful. It won’t benefit me, but that’s not the point. I think we lose a lot of history and a lot of experience when we term limit people when they’re just beginning to learn this process. This process of government is very unique. You have to learn that process. We should have the freedom to choose whoever we want to choose to represent us.

Finchum: Maybe you’ll stay around long enough to help others push it through.

Easley: I’ll be term limited myself. But, I will continue to be involved in issues about which I am passionate about.

Finchum: So you’ll help in that way.

Easley: I will help in that way. I will always be politically involved and I honestly believe I will have a family member who will come back to the Senate one day. I have a grandson who is very interested in politics. He’s a freshman at the University of Oklahoma now and he has a plan for his life and I think part of it will include [serving in] the Senate. So I think we’ll have another Easley here from our family.

Finchum: You also served when the Senate was 24-24.

Easley: Yes.

Finchum: Do you want to talk about that experience?

Easley: I think all members of the Senate were very anxious about having that tie, and there were some anxious moments. But having the leadership we had, Senator [Mike] Morgan was a uniter. He was willing to work with Senator [Glenn] Coffee. They worked together well. I was very impressed with both of them when they brought the Senate together and we were able to get work done and able to compromise. The first session we had the tie, it worked well and I was very pleased. We shared committees. We were co-chairs that first session. A Republican and a Democrat co-chaired every committee. That was fair and the right way to do it, in my opinion. As the next election came, and changes were made, we lost a member. We Democrats have no chairmanship any
longer and it’s more difficult now to get things done for our party.

**Finchum**

*When you walk out the door the last day, will you feel like you’ve accomplished most of what you set out to do?*

**Easley**

One never feels like the job is done. I have a problem with that because there are many things I wanted to get done and I’d still have advice for people who come and represent us. I feel that I served my people to the best of my ability. I worked hard. I feel like I was honest and I tried to represent their ideas as well as my own here. So I feel like we have made some progress.

**Finchum**

*If someone were to come to you—a woman in particular—and ask for advice about possibly running, what are some of the things you would tell her?*

**Easley**

Of course, it would depend on the particular individual. I’ve had many women come to me and tell me that they want to represent the district when I’m term limited. I usually encourage them because I think it’s wrong to discourage someone from running. But it’s a very difficult process these days because politics is not what it once was. One must spend most of the time trying to raise money [for campaigns]. To be competitive you have to have a good base. You have to have a thick skin, I guess you could say. One must realize, when you enter a race, your family enters with you. There have been some real difficult problems for me to face when the press and my opponent attacked my family.

You’re going to see yourself on television and the truth has been diluted and changed—I mean it’s just not there. People can take anything and change it to make you look like you are some kind of unfit candidate. It’s very sad what’s happened in our state. Politics has become very dirty and very political. It takes a lot of money and if you aren’t a wealthy person it’s going to be hard to get together the funds, especially if you’re in the minority party. It’s going to be difficult, but if you work hard and you have a passion to represent the people in your district, you have some ideas and issues that you would like to see put into law, then I would say you can do it, but it’s going to be more difficult. Especially being a woman, you have to learn to have a very thick skin.

By the way, an announcement has already been made in my district [about] who is going to follow me, and she is a very good friend of mine. Her name is Janice Aldridge. She will be running and I will be helping her. So we will have another female, hopefully, in my seat, with some of the same ideas and ideals and passions that I have had.
 Finchum

She’ll have a good mentor.

Easley

I have had many mentors here, and one of them, of course, is my son. Kevin served his district well and the people respected him when he left. I’m hoping that can happen with me as well and we can get someone to serve who will have those same ambitions.

 Finchum

Describe a typical day for you during session.

Easley

Many people skip committee meetings. I’ve never been one [to miss]. I guess that comes from my school training; you don’t skip faculty meetings. I never did anyway. I’ve found that going to committee meetings, it can be laborsome and boring sometimes, but it’s necessary [to become informed about legislation we will vote on]. That’s why we have the committee process. I’ve missed very few committee meetings. I want to be there to start and end the process. I know many members when they have termed out, that last session they don’t attend but I will. I’ve told my district that, my supporters, I will work until the last day. And I will. I still go to all the meetings and I go to birthdays and pie suppers out in the district. I try to attend anything that I’m asked to do. I go to the schools. I was just there last Friday attending a school in Spavinaw and talking to the students about government. I will work until the last day of my term.

 Finchum

Do you read a lot of bills? How much of your time...

Easley

I guess I didn’t cover that whole day, did I? (Laughter) Kind of wondered around a bit. I usually don’t socialize like some people do. I like to go out. I enjoy the members here in the Senate, they are good friends of mine, many of them, both parties. I enjoy people, I always have but I feel I have an obligation to read the bills and contact my constituents. I call them back. I stay here nights, many nights, till seven during session calling people, emailing people, answering phone calls, reading the bills. You can’t read the whole bill but you can read the changes and by this time you know what those bills are, pretty much. You just need to be careful about what the changes are.

 Finchum

Is listening coming in there somewhere along the way, as an important skill to have?

Easley

It is. I’ve had a great deal of trouble with that. I just enjoy people and I enjoy talking. I guess I do a lot of that myself. I wish that I had listened a little bit more. People have problems and many times they call me when they have a problem and they just want me to listen. They’re very disturbed about national government at times and [over] that I get a lot of phone calls and emails, people disgruntled about national
government.

Finchum  
*I can imagine ...*

Easley  
I’m getting a lot of calls on healthcare and just all of the issues that are going on, the wars and things that people are concerned about. Basically it’s healthcare right now. People are very anxious about what the health bill will do, whether we’ll even get it passed.

Finchum  
*What will be one of the things you miss the most when you leave?*

Easley  
The other day I had someone in my office, a colleague, and we were talking about this, what I will miss. I love the people here. I like the staff, I like our leaders, I like the people, the EAs (the Executive Assistants), I’ve just gotten to know them all and I will miss them. This has been a community and it is like a community because when you come to the Capitol, there are people here who are here almost every day. Not just the senators and representatives, but the lobbyists and our friends who come in to encourage us to do the right thing. It’s just a little community all itself and I will miss these people. We have many good people here who have assisted us in writing bills and research and keeping us legal and keeping us within the Constitution.

Finchum  
*What are you plans afterwards?*

Easley  
I have never been a person who doesn’t have a plan because there are never enough hours in the day to do all the things I want to do. I’ve just returned from a trip with relatives, my sister and husband, and my best friend and her husband, to Charleston. I’ve found a new author, Pat Conroy, whose books I enjoyed reading about Charleston. Before I [went] there I wanted to read his novel. There’s parts of it that I thought, “Well, I don’t know if I can finish this book or not,” but he’s a great writer and I would recommend him. He talks about life as it really is. I had to broaden my vocabulary a little bit by reading his book. He’s a new author. I like to read. It’s one of my favorite things to do, to sit and read novels. I get started on one author and I would like to read several of his books or her books. I do that and then I like to visit the places they’ve written about. John Grisham is one of my favorite authors. His one true book was about the situation in Ada, *The Innocent Man*. That book was very fascinating to me because it was about Oklahoma. He’s been here. I think there’s a lawsuit even now, pending, about that book and his problems with the DA down there.

Finchum  
*Interesting.*

Easley  
I love to take an author and just read everything he’s written and then
take another. So I’ve got a long way to go to read all the books I want to read. Then I want to travel, my husband and I. He’s been putting off some trips. I want to go to Ireland. I’ve been to England, Wales, Scotland, but I’ve never gone to Ireland and that’s where my ancestors originated, in Ireland. I want to see Ireland and go back to the place where my great-grandfather lived and just do a little bit of genealogy in that respect. That’s one thing I have on my agenda and then I want to spend, as I do even now, I want to spend as much time as I can with my grandchildren. As you see, my wall’s just covered with [photos of my] grandchildren. They are my most precious heritage.

**Finchum**  
*So when you retire the second time there won’t be a ‘going back to work’ a third time?*

**Easley**  
Oh, I would not say that because I have some ambitions. You know, I don’t think you’re old until you stop. And I have no plans for a rocking chair except if someone gives me a new baby grandchild [and then] I will see that rocking chair is used again. But I believe we’re through with grandchildren. I have some plans. I’m thinking very seriously about doing some volunteer work at the hospital. Pink is my favorite color, I’ve always said, and I would love to be a pink lady over at St. Francis Hospital. I will try that more than likely. I will do some volunteering. And then my son being at Grand River Dam Authority, he wants me to conduct tours at the Tourist Center there and I will probably do some of that.

**Finchum**  
*That sounds fun.*

**Easley**  
It will be fun. I tell you, I will have fun wherever.

**Finchum**  
*Still meeting people and...*

**Easley**  
Still having fun with people.

**Finchum**  
*My last question is, when history’s written about you, what would you like for it to say?*

**Easley**  
I guess pertaining to this job I would say I came here for a reason, to serve the people in my district. And I hope they will know that I did serve them with honesty and integrity. That’s the way I feel about it. That says a lot about people I think, if you can say they’re a person of integrity.

**Finchum**  
*Is there anything you want to add before we sign off?*

**Easley**  
No. I’ve been very fortunate to have good health and to have two careers
where I loved serving.

**Finchum**  
*I read somewhere one of your favorite poems was The Road Not Taken.*

**Easley**  
Yes, Robert Frost is one of the pastoral poets who is very simple in his language but he has a way of giving you the truth. I think that in his poem *The Road Not Taken*, that he probably pondered that. He’s just one of my favorites. He spoke at John Kennedy’s inauguration. I’ll never forget seeing him there that snowy day when he stood on the Capitol steps with his poem in hand to read at the inauguration of one of my favorite presidents, John Kennedy. He stood there, that white hair blowing in the wind and that snow. It was so nostalgic. He lost his notes—that’s pretty typical of something I would do, but he proceeded to read his poem in honor of that day.

I feel that he has a message in all of his poetry. *The Road Not Taken* was special to me because I felt it fit my life. There were opportunities for me along the way to choose, to get to a point where I would have to choose which way to go. I like the last line where he says, “And I chose the road less travelled, and that’s made all of the difference.” I feel like that’s what I’ve done. I haven’t always done that, no one could be perfect in all their travels but I feel like that’s been an important point in my life.

**Finchum**  
*The citizens of Oklahoma are glad that you picked to serve them.*

**Easley**  
Thank you, Tanya.

**Finchum**  
*Thank you for having me today.*

**Easley**  
I appreciate it.

------- End of interview -------