An Oral History Interview

with

JOHN GABUSI (part 4)

conducted by
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John Gabusi

John Gabusi was born in Florence, Arizona, in 1941 and raised in Clifton. He studied and taught political science at the University of Arizona before co-founding Behavioral Research, a public opinion polling firm, with classmate Earl DeBerg. In 1966 he began working for Arizona Congressman Morris K. Udall in a variety of capacities, including managing his 1976 bid for the democratic presidential nomination. He left Udall’s employ in 1977 to work for the Community Services Administration. He was then asked to help organize and establish the new Department of Education, where he later became assistant secretary for management. After Republican Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency, he went to work for Control Data Corporation in Minnesota. In 2002 he accepted the job of Vice Chancellor at Pima Community College in Tucson, where he has remained since.
JG: So this call from the White House, where they asked me to head up the task force, the ultimate goal of which was to, on a given day, announce the inauguration of the new cabinet Department of Education. So I took leave from the job I was in—I was still getting paid, but I mean I was put in charge of this—and I spent a good part of the ensuing year working with Dick Beatty, who became a very good friend of mine. He’s now one of these Wall Street lawyers. He’s in one of these books about Wall Street guys that make all kinds of money—he’s always listed as their lawyer. Really nice guy.

Anyway, we put this department together, recruited the staff, we did merging. There was a lot of stuff involved—it’s all bureaucracy. How do you get your payroll if you’re one day Agency X, and the next day you’re Department Y?—doing the same work, but you’ve got to have all the paper and other procedures of it, what you need to do. So I did that. And as a result of that, in the midst of that, they said they wanted to make me an assistant secretary for management and budget of the soon-to-be-created Department of Education. So when they did the announcements of the new department, they said the new officers of the department will have to go to the Senate for confirmation. So I went back up and was reconfirmed in a different position as assistant secretary for management and budget of the Department of Education; having just spent the previous year putting it together.

JF: When you were putting it together, was that like a paid job, or something you were doing . . .

JG: Well, I was technically doing my other job. In the government they have a phrase for it, like being on loan or something—I don’t know what it is. But anyway, so then the department is created, and I go over to the Department of Education in that position. And I go over there until [Ronald] Reagan kicks us out. I was assistant secretary there in that department.

JF: And how was that?

JG: That was the same kind of job. It was fine, except it was a new job, and I was always involved in something, because it’s like building a Rube Goldberg machine—there’s always lots of little mistakes that you’ve got to fix. And since I and Dick were the makers of it, we also had to be the fixers of it.

JF: So you were basically the original builders of the new Department of Education.

JG: That’s right.

JF: That’s quite an experience.

JG: Oh, it was, it was. I’d never done that. I’d run a campaign, but I’d never done that.

JF: Never built your own department.
JG: No. And it was very interesting, how life changes things. The guy who recruited me for that job was a young ambitious Democrat from Virginia, who was working in the office, the government personnel office for political people. His name is Decker Anstrom. And he was of great help, good friend, political guy, all that. Decker is, today, the CEO and president of the Weather Channel.

JF: You’re kidding! (laughter)

JG: No. A lot of people in those years that I met are scattered all over the place. It’s amazing.

JF: Even just in Mo’s campaign, looking at where some people are….

JG: Oh, yes! Well, look at old Jack.

JF: Jack Quinn, oh yeah.

JG: Yes, he envisioned himself right into it. He did very well. But anyway….

JF: And then when Reagan came in, what did you [do]?

JG: At one o’clock on January twenty-whatever, they kicked me out. So I left.

JF: And did you stay in D.C.?

JG: For a short while. But actually, I went to Minnesota where I went to work for…. At the end of the election, we’d been given carte blanche to use our remaining four months to go find a job—all the executive level. And there were contacts and things that were recommended to us. One of my good friends at the time was a guy named Jim Johnson, who worked for Mondale. Jim went on to be head of Fannie May, I think, or one of those Fannie-Grannie-Mays—whatever. And he suggested that I get in contact with Control Data Corporation in Minneapolis, which at the time was a high-flying, Fortune 500 company, and was considered a very good company to work for. They recruited me into it, to see if I was interested, and I was. It was an international marketing job for some of their subsidiaries. So they hired me, and I went and lived in Minneapolis and did work for—primarily we worked in the office of the chairman of the board on new ventures. This meant we went into places that were interesting, like Alaska and the Caribbean and places where they thought there might be computer technologies that might be of benefit in areas that didn’t have them yet.

JF: Did you get to go on the trips?

JG: Oh, yes. I was one of the marketing guys—it was a team.

JF: So you changed from budget?
JG: Oh, totally. To straight marketing—and an international flavor to it and stuff.

JF: Did you ever have any regrets of leaving Mo’s office during that time?

JG: No, not Mo’s office. There were times I regretted leaving Washington, but that was about it.

JF: How long were you in Minnesota?

JG: Less than three years—two and a half years. What happened was I just—I did very well financially. It’s a marketing company, so if you do well…. But I got into an argument with my boss on whether I was being adequately compensated on bonus systems. I thought I wasn’t, and he thought I was. So I had, in the meantime, negotiated a return to Washington with a similarly situated company—one of the consulting firms in D.C. And so I walked in one day and announced I was quitting. Well, of course, they shat a brick, because I was one of their leading marketing guys. I was a rainmaker, I brought in business. So they were now faced with the fact that I was just up and quitting on them. And I told them why, and I said I already had another job, etc., etc. So what they did is, they hired me on an ancillary contract to continue doing work for Control Data while I was working for the other company in Washington. So they ended up having to pay me a couple hundred thousand dollars so they didn’t lose the business that I was in the midst of bringing in for them.

JF: Wow.

JG: So that worked out fine.

JF: For you. They probably regretted their former decision.

JG: Well, he made his mistake when he didn’t pay me what he owed me. That’s where he made his mistake. (JF: Exactly.) Because I wouldn’t have gone otherwise.

JF: So you were back in D.C.?

JG: Yes, I moved back to D.C.

JF: During this period of time, did you and Terry stay in contact?

JG: Yes. He left the same time I did from the government, and he had a partner named Hector Alcalde. They opened a firm over in Arlington, transportation lobby. I think Terry’s first clients were City of Tucson, Tucson Airport Authority. And so Hector and he…. I knew Hector from Florida. He’d also worked in the Department of Transportation. He and Terry broke up their company. I think Terry hooked up with Susan Williams, who had also worked for him in the Department of Transportation. He had hired her, I think, as an aide or something. And they then formed their company that existed until very recently.
JF: So you’ve stayed in contact throughout, pretty much.

JG: Oh sure, yes.

JF: But you really didn’t have much contact with Mo?

JG: No. Terry’s an anomaly to everybody, that he stayed in touch with Mo for so long—so closely, I mean. I mean, with “others” meaning others who worked with Mo. Nobody else, that I know of, maintained that kind of a relationship. And I didn’t, because the first few years after I left, it was mutually understood, “don’t see me, I won’t see you.” And then I think we hooked up somewhere, maybe in Arizona. I don’t even know where.

JF: Bruce Wright, I think, continued to see him.

JG: Did he? I didn’t know.

JF: I think Bruce Wright did.

JG: See, that was a whole ’nother generation.

JF: Oh, I know.

JG: What happened after 1977-78….

JF: I’m always having people come up and say, “I know somebody who worked for Mo, you must know them.” And I have no idea.

JG: Right, because that was a whole different generation. I loved it when that woman ran for Congress—Mary Jo? Was that her name? There was one here in Tucson that ran against Kolbe—a lawyer, worked in the county attorney’s office.

JF: Oh, Mary Judge Ryan.

JG: And she had one of her brochures about “worked for Mo Udall, presidential campaign.”

JF: She had, but she had been a staff member for Mo Udall. And I know Mary Judge Ryan. I never asked, her but….

JG: What I was told by Terry—I think Terry told me—is that she’d been one of these law school interns.

JF: I think that’s right.

JG: That was her job, just like when we hired Stanley Scoville.
JF: Or David Nix.

JG: And she got the internship. It coincided with, or was close to the campaign period. And she, over the years, translated that to staffer for the congressman. Well, you and I both know what those interns were. They were interns.

JF: I noticed that also.

JG: But people do that, generations later.

JF: Yes. It’s interesting. So you went back to Washington, and basically you were doing the same thing that you’d been doing in Minnesota?

JG: Well, more or less—different clients, but basically working with them on development projects, that sort of thing.

JF: And how did you eventually get back to Arizona?

JG: Well, I was doing this until I was—I was in this business, I was doing a lot of international work. And an episode occurred in Montenegro, where I was basically hijacked by some criminals—true story.

JF: Oh! you have to tell me about that!

JG: I was doing work in Eastern Europe. I was on a plane from Warsaw to Belgrade. Was Belgrade [in] Yugoslavia before it was Yugoslavia?

JF: Yes.

JG: Yes, it was Belgrade, Yugoslavia, right. So I was from Warsaw to Belgrade, and the plane—it was a jet plane, Jat, commercial airline—hit weather, was diverted to a small airport in Montenegro, which is a province of then Yugoslavia. Montenegro now, I think, is a republic.

JF: Yes, it is, I believe.

JG: So anyway, we land there to wait out the storm, and some criminals in cars and jeeps drive up to the airplane—it’s a very small airport—and order everybody to get out of the airplane. I was the only English-speaking. Everybody was Turkish. There was one English-speaking—that’s me. There was another—I think it was a Greek—who was multilingual. Then the rest were Turks. I don’t know why they were all Turks, but they were.

JF: This wasn’t during the war over there, was it?
JG: It was the beginning of the war—the war hadn’t started, but it was right at the beginning of the breakup of the Yugoslav Republic. The others had settled down. I was doing work in Poland and Czechoslovakia, where the revolutions were in place now. But this was just starting in the Balkans. They separated us out, they took all the goods, our suitcases—they took everything except my passport and my wallet, and some money—other money they took. They told us to sit there. I guess they stripped everybody. I was isolated. I was in a little cement area by myself, not knowing what the fuck was going on. These were guys talking in Serb or whatever the hell they talked—not English. We were there for six or seven hours. Then all of a sudden the captain, the plane guy—there were three of them—were told to turn on the airplane and get the hell out of town. So they told us to get on the plane—no goods, no nothing, just us.

JF: So all the passengers got back on?

JG: Yes. I guess they had all been stripped of anything and everything of value. And the plane took off, and it got to Belgrade. I got off, I had a credit card, I was in a company. I went across to the place where you buy tickets. I bought a one-way ticket, Pan American, to New York, and said, “I’m never coming back to this fucking part of the world!” And I never did. I got back to New York, with nothing but the credit card and the ticket. I went to Washington where our offices were, and I told my partners I was done with international travel. And I started thinking about a job somewhere else.

I’d been visiting Arizona. My mother was here, and I had done a bit of work for the chancellor of the Maricopa system, a guy named Paul Elsner—not as Maricopa. He was a writer, and he had other projects. I don’t know how he and I hooked up somewhere, and he wanted me to do some work for him.

But anyway, I just started looking around. And one day in The Washington Post, there was an article that said that Pima College had hired a new chancellor, who was the chancellor of the Virginia system, and lived in Richmond, Virginia. I didn’t know the guy from Adam. I didn’t know what Pima College was. I’d never been there in my life.

JF: Really?

JG: No, I didn’t know nothin’. But it was Tucson, it was an address, it was a local contact that I could reach out to. So I wrote a letter to this guy—Jeff Hockaday was his name. He was the chancellor of the entire system in Virginia. I said who I was, what I did, that I was looking for angles, if there were any opportunities in Tucson, Arizona. I thought my skills might match some of his needs as he took over the job. Well, lo and behold, he calls me up, and I meet him in Washington the following week. We had never met each other in our lives before that. So we sit and we talk for a couple of hours. He explained to me that he hadn’t even gotten there yet, didn’t have the job, “But,” he said, “when I get there, I’ll look around and I’ll keep you in mind. Give me a phone number how I can reach you, if anything ever comes to pass.” So I wrote down on a business card or whatever. (JF: Cocktail napkin? (chuckles)) I wrote down Martha’s address, because I had no Tucson address. I lived in Washington, I was working in Washington.
So I said, “But I have a sister in Tucson. Here’s her phone number, and if anything comes up, call her. She’ll then call me.”

So a year and a half later or so, out of the blue, Martha calls me and says that she got a call from some Hockabuba or something, that I was to call him about a job or about something. So I call him, and sure enough, he said, “I remember you, and I’ve got two jobs that might be of interest to you. I think you might fit it. If you’re interested, let me know.” And so we picked one, and he took care of it, offered me the job, and I said, “Fine,” and I moved from Washington to Pima College.

JF: What year was that?


JF: I notice you’ve had a few titles there. Did you start as a vice-chancellor?

JG: Yes.

JF: And what was the first position?

JG: He created a position, I think, for me, and it was economic development. It was a schmoozing position.

JF: Fund raising?

JG: No, we had a fund raiser. It was going to meetings. He liked the idea that I was very political.

JF: Public relations, to some extent?

JG: Yes, politics. He liked it that I could—like my uncle was a member of the board of supervisors, so I used him.

JF: This was Sam Lena?

JG: Yes, Sam was my uncle. And I used him, and others that I knew, to be introduced to the new chancellor of the college. There were projects I helped expedite—projects meaning some sort of patronage, help somebody get a job or whatever. That sort of stuff. It was very easy.

JF: At some point, did you go back to school in education?

JG: No.

JF: You never went back and got a Ph.D.? (JG: [No.]) Okay. For some reason, I had it in my mind that you had.
JG: Well, I have an honorary degree.

JF: Oh, you do?

JG: Oh, yes, I have an honorary doctorate.

JF: From?

JG: University of San Francisco.

JF: For?

JG: For being a good politician in the Carter administration. That’s another one of the scams. When you’re in the government at a high level—every administration does it—somewhere in the course of the year, somebody will come to you and say—in this case, it was some senior staffer—“Would you be interested in getting an honorary degree?” Literally! I said, “Well, it depends. Where is it?” I was thinking of a vacation. And he said, “San Francisco.” I said, “That sounds pretty good.” He said, “Yes, we can arrange for you to have a Ph.D. or an honorary doctor of laws,” they gave you options, you know.

JF: Is this so they can then put “Dr. Gabusi” on the stationery, more or less?

JG: Well, it’s an honorary degree. They do it, the schools do it, in the hopes that it’ll help them get some sort of money, grants, whatever. I did it because I thought I’d go to San Francisco and….

JF: Make a vacation out of it. (laughs)

JG: Yes. But they did a beautiful plaque, they did everything. It’s four-square honorary, it’s really….

JF: “Doctor Gabusi.”

JG: Oh, yes! So when I got back, I never called myself “Dr.,” and one day Dr. Hockaday says—he knew I had the honor—he says, “Aren’t you going to change your….” “What?” “Yes, you’re now Dr. Gabusi.” I said, “I’m not a doctor! It’s honorary.” He says, “In education, every degree counts, honorary or not—especially so in education.” So I said, “Fine.” Actually, my business cards, some of them say “Mr.” and some say “Dr.” I don’t know what…. I don’t really give a shit, so I don’t know.

JF: How has your position changed there over the years?

JG: Well, it morphed into more lobbying, because we had a lobbyist when they hired me, and Hockaday fired him within a year. He was awful. He’s a lazy cynic who didn’t want to do any work or anything. Basically, with his departure, Jeff just said, “You take it
JF: So it’s basically lobbying?

JG: That part of it. But then I took over the running of the foundation, so I have somebody who runs the foundation who reports to me. She raises the money, and I’m her manager, and stuff like that.

JF: Did you ever imagine you’d be this much into an educational setting?

JG: No. Like I said, I didn’t know what Pima College was. I’d never in my life been there, I didn’t know what it was, when I got the job.

JF: Sounds like a good match, though.

JG: Yes, it’s worked out real well.

JF: Sounds like it’s been a good match. Well, unless you have some stories or memories that you’d like to add…. I tend to end interviews just asking for what you would envision as Mo’s greatest strengths and weaknesses, having worked for him for so long, and so closely.

JG: I think the best way to think about Mo is to think of two people: the Mo Udall that the world sees, that his colleagues saw, that the public saw, was exactly as he was. The private Mo was more like Abe Lincoln, I think. He could be very quiet, very bitter, very pissed-off at things. I never saw him raise his voice at any staff person or anything like that. [unclear] in private, where he and I and maybe Terry or Roger, he would let a few things out, but not about staff or anything. In some respects, he was oblivious to the things that other people thought were really important. In all the years I worked for Mo—all the years—he only, on one occasion that I have a vivid memory of, did he ever thank me and compliment me on a good job. And Terry and I joked about it for years, that he actually did it. Because most of the time, he didn’t do anything for anybody.

JF: He probably just….

JG: Took it for granted, that was your job.

JF: He was kind of a hands-off person, wasn’t he?

JG: Oh, very much so. I’ve told you the story, one of my best stories about Ella is that he and Ella had been in some dispute privately in the office, and I can’t even remember what it had to do with. It probably had something to do with money, but I don’t know what. But he had to go over to the floor, and he wanted me to come with him so he could talk about this on the way over. And I’ll remember this to my dying day: it was the Longworth Office Building, and we were walking along and I told him something to the
effect that it sounded to me like the kind of dispute that he and Ella had to work out privately, that it was not anything that he could—it had to do with the campaign, I guess. It was nothing, really, that Stewart or I could deal with Ella about. And we talked a little bit about that, and we got to the elevator, and as the elevator was opening, I said to Mo, “Well, how do you want to handle this?” And he turned to me and he said, “That’s your problem.” And the door closed. That was his solution, at the end of the day, to say, “You go handle it.” That’s hands off.

JF: That’s hands off.

JG: He didn’t want to deal with his wife on these issues. That’s why Ella used to take out after me about things.

JF: So you were the fall guy.

JG: Well, you know, I had to say “no” a lot.

JF: My impression sometimes is that he had a shy quality about him, at least around women.

JG: Oh, very much so—we used to joke about that.

JF: He always seemed to just be a little uncomfortable and couldn’t quite be himself if women were around.

JG: Is this off the record?

JF: No. Would you like it to be?

JG: Just turn it off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]