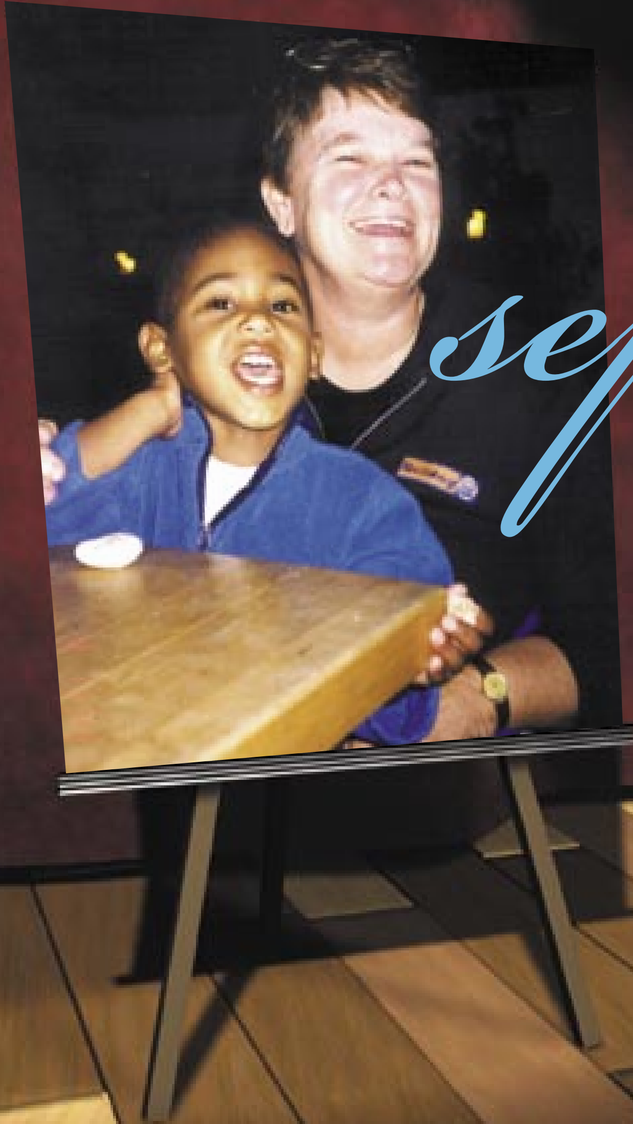


a life on *separate* stages

I interviewed Sheila Kuehl for another magazine almost a decade ago when she first arrived in the Legislature as the freshly elected Assemblywoman from West Los Angeles. She was still the former child star to most of us then, a public figure defined by her early years as an actress on popular television shows from the fifties and early sixties. Although her campaign materials touted her decades-long involvement in social issues and her Harvard law degree, there was more curiosity than any adamancy that she'd fulfill a promise of leadership in the term-limited Legislature.

BY AARON READ

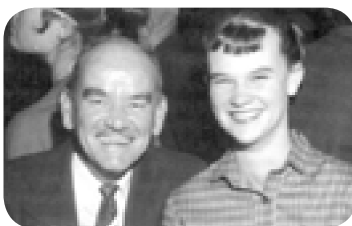
Sheila was fun from the beginning. She likes laughing. She once made being funny a career decision, and life choices and a sense that there is a ludicrousness to the patterns of each person's life, give an experienced perspective to her humor. She can follow a punch line with a morality tale. She is an interesting conversationalist, sharp, and a good storyteller who tells stories fast and with excellent timing.

It would be inaccurate to say Sheila doesn't take herself seriously, because she does, almost vainglorious at times, as she remembers clearly the many compliments and honors she's earned over the years. She knows she's smart. She'll tell you. She is not secretive. Her personality is a commodity she's been selling in tough arenas since she was a little girl. Her private life as the first admittedly gay candidate elected to the Legislature has been both an open book for those who love her and her detractors. Of course, what matters most to her, and those who have gotten to know her during the politician stage of her life, is a Cagneyesque, spit-in-the-eyes willingness to engage in consequential discussion on how we are allowed to live our lives–a real world concept that public policy impacts Californians in elemental ways.

I met with Sheila this time after hours in her Senate office. She goofily and disarmingly was sitting behind the receptionist's desk pretending that she was in charge of her own schedule. It is good to be in Sheila World. She joked that the years since we first met have aged us both–well, in her case at least, it is not obvious. She is small, not diminutive, compact, her face ruddy, pleasantly mid-America, filled with a ranging actresses' expressions. Her short hair is economically styled and combed back from her forehead. The years have not taken away the look that made her a recognizable child star.

After spending much of her life trying to change a political system that seems skewed enough to exclude entire classes of people, she's managed to become someone important on the inside. Sheila carries important legislation, runs a vital committee, heads an experienced staff –smart people who away from her presence express their unabashed devotion to her–and makes a significant presence in the Legislature.

Her office is executive, clubby, a mostly organized workplace with rich colors and places to sit comfortably and chat. The awards from a grateful constituency crowd the walls. There are dozens of pictures on her credenza of politicians from both parties, including a youthful Arnold Schwarzenegger from his days when he was only an actor adding glamour to an event. There is also one with Sheila and Oprah, a picture that has a double bang for the buck since JFK Jr. is in the middle of them. There are several pictures of the gay caucus, pictures with Governors Pete Wilson and Gray Davis, and numerous photos of her younger sister (a judge) and her sister's family.



THE EARLY DAYS; A MOMENT WITH BOB DENVER (GILLIGAN)

California Conversations:
I don't think of Sheila Kuehl and Tulsa in the same breath.

Sheila Kuehl: *(laughs)* Is that a question?

CC: Sure.

SK: My parents grew up in St. Louis. My dad was working for MacDonald Aircraft and they went on strike just before WWII. He didn't want to cross the picket line, but he really needed to work, so he built a trailer for him and my mom, who was pregnant with me, to live in. They drove to a job in a new state and parked the trailer on the side of the road, which is where they lived. Then my mom, when it was time, went to the hospital and I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

CC: 1941.

SK: Yes. My dad was 4F because he had a busted eardrum that he'd gotten as a kid, and he was hired along with a number of men who were very small in stature to inspect airplanes for the Navy. He was transferred to a sleepy little town, El Segundo, California.

CC: How small was he?

SK: 5'2". And my mother was 4'11". I was their first child.

CC: What were your folks like?

SK: My dad was an incredibly inventive man. Neither my mother nor my father went beyond the 8th grade. But my dad went to classes where you learned to be an electrician, plumbing, carpentry, all that kind of stuff–a trade school. After he worked at Douglas, he was a window decorator and had clients that were shoe stores, dress stores, drapery shops, and he would build their displays. He was the first guy in L.A. to rent this stuff, instead of selling it to stores.

CC: Successful financially?

SK: We never owned anything. We always rented. And the most he ever made might have been $10,000 or $11,000 a year.

CC: Were your parents older parents?

SK: Interesting question. They were almost 30 when they had me. The thing we learned from my dad was you could take anything apart and put it back together, which is very useful in any walk of life. My mother believed that all things were fated to be, but that there was a sort of magic in the world, too. She wrote songs that she never sent to anybody.

CC: What were their names?

SK: Lillian Ruth and Arthur Joseph.

CC: Did they live long lives?

SK: My mom died when she was 78. My dad died when he was 84. They loved us so much that my sister and I never felt insecure. My mom was orphaned at the age of 11. By the time she was fourteen she was a forelady at a men's garter factory. The stories we heard growing up were how great it was to work, that work didn't feel oppressive to them, even though there were no child labor laws, no unions.

CC: Who is Stu Irwin?

SK: Stu Irwin is the star of the first series I did. I started working in television when I was nine. It was the first filmed television series and I was cast to play his daughter Jackie. The series lasted five years.

CC: Did you control your own money as a child actress?

SK: My parents were surprised at how little the law required them to put away, because they were putting it all away. The weekly pay was $220 a week, which was a fortune really back then. I had money for college and to buy a Volkswagen when I was 16.

CC: How did you get into television?

SK: A guy came door-to-door signing up kids to take tap dancing lessons or ballet lessons or singing lessons. And I was already a good personality at the age of seven, so my parents said okay. I mean it was really cheap, like fifty cents for each lesson. One night the drama class did a skit called, "The Old Sleuth." I was the sleuth's assistant. I didn't have any lines, but I was supposed to listen for clues. I would listen very hard and make a face and the audience started laughing, which I really liked. So the more they laughed, the more I made faces. Afterward, I was asked to read for a radio series and I got the part, working with Penny Singleton who played Blondie in the movies and on the radio and Gayle Gordon who later was on Lucy, and Jim Backus who was Mr. Magoo. They were fabulous actors. We were in Studio B. Studio A had Bob Hope and Doris Day. Studio C–the Cisco Kid and Pancho, who used to do their show in full regalia. I eventually got an agent. He sent me on an interview for the Stu Irwin show later that year, and I got it.

CC: You were a child star?

SK: *(laughs)* I was certainly a child actor. I did the series

for five years and then I freelanced. They were doing ninety-minute live dramas, the so-called "Golden Age" of television. Then when I was at UCLA, gosh I guess I was probably a sophomore, maybe a junior already, when I went for the interview for Dobie Gillis.

Dobie Gillis, or more accurately, 'The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis' was the original teenage sitcom. It starred Dwayne Hickman, another talented child actor and Bob Denver, a joyful beatnik character who had even greater success in his next series, Gilligan's Island. Sheila played the tomboy neighbor. Dobie was the first television series to treat teenagers as real people and not Hollywood types.

CC: How many years were you on Dobie Gillis?
SK: Four years. I started in 1959. I was a theater major when I got Dobie. I thought about quitting school, but through the intercession of a wonderful writer who knew the head of the English Department, I was able to stay at UCLA as an English major.

CC: Dobie was a fun time?
SK: It was a great time. It was a wonderful cast, very collegial.

CC: Was Bob Denver a fun guy?
SK: He was wonderful. Bob was very professional, and I said that about him when he died and I spoke about him on the floor (of the senate). He could steal any scene from anybody. He wouldn't do it.

CC: He did Gilligan afterwards and then it was over for him?
SK: Well, it's true. It's a short life in television for most actors.

CC: Did you stay close friends?
SK: Yes, for the rest of our lives. It was interesting when I first ran in 1994, and Dwayne and Bobby offered to do a fundraiser for me. Bobby lived in West Virginia and had to take five planes to come to California.

CC: Did you work with Warren Beatty (the rich kid in Dobie Gillis)?
SK: Yes. Warren for a short time, and Tuesday Weld. Tuesday was with the show pretty much all along.

CC: Are you close to them?
SK: I wouldn't say I'm close to Warren. He called me about three weeks ago because he still thinks it's funny we worked on the show and now he's a big movie star and I'm a Senator. I admire what Warren's done, his work and his political stuff.

CC: What about Tuesday Weld?
SK: Don't even know where she lives.

CC: I think she was the prettiest girl ever to be on TV.
SK: I think so, too. She did a movie that was shot at UCLA shortly after we finished our series. I saw this circle of people watching something near Royce Hall. It was a very strange moment for me, because I was a UCLA Bruin, and there was Tuesday being an actress. It was both my worlds coming together.

CC: What did you do?
SK: I sat down next to Tuesday, and we were talking and she turned to me, very poignantly, and said, "Do you think I could ever go to college?"…*(shrugs)* You know, you don't want to say to a Class A actress, hey, you might have to find something else to do, but it turns out we always have to find something else to do.

CC: There was a move to do a spin-off of Dobie Gillis?
SK: Zelda was a very popular character, got a lot of fan mail, and they wanted to do a spin-off with her character. It was the only time I ever starred in anything. I was at all the script meetings, I was at all the casting meetings late at night and it was very heavy to be the star. We made the pilot. Everybody thought it was very funny.

CC: Did you think it was funny?
SK: I think it was funny.

CC: You've been quoted saying the series didn't go because studio executives thought the Zelda character was 'too butch'.
SK: Not the Zelda character…the Sheila person. *(Sheila squares up in her chair, still bothered as she tells a story that doesn't soften in the retelling)* Just prior to that, I was staying at UCLA, in a sorority, and my sorority found letters my partner had written to me. I had gotten in a relationship with a woman when I was 17, and it was so natural. I had all these boyfriends, boyfriends, boyfriends, and then I met this woman and oh, this is what it feels like to fall in love. I mean it was so different. Everybody tells you it's not innate, you cannot believe it. And so, they found letters she had written to me. I went back for my senior year and they kicked me out of the soror-

I had all these boyfriends, boyfriends, boyfriends, and then I met this woman and oh, this is what it feels like to fall in love.

TORRI OSBORNE AND SHEILA KUEHL

ity. Then the pilot was made, and it didn't sell. We were working late and the director took me for a walk and said the president of CBS thinks you're a little too butch. *(another pause)* My partner and I were very young and very, very deeply in the closet. She was 2 ½ to 3 years older. We were very deeply in the closet for obvious reasons, and scared to death because I didn't know anybody like us at all. You know, I'd heard there were queer people, and that it was a terrible thing to be, so it was a very difficult time. I felt that cold feeling like somebody smashed an ice cap on my head and it all ran down the back of my neck. I thought, now everybody will know.

CC: Did they cut back the Zelda character?
SK: I only did four shows the fourth year and I had done 39 a year before. It was over.

CC: Did you work after Dobie?
SK: I did one more series right away and I was like fifth-billed. It was a spin-off from McHale's Navy called Broadside and it came and went quickly.

CC: Did you come out after that?
SK: I didn't come out for years and years and years and years. I mean, you learn a lesson that somebody even suspects you're gay and you lose your whole career. I went to work at UCLA. I had a lot of jobs over the next several years, because I didn't really know what to do. I thought I would be an actress. I thought it was a great tragedy losing my career.

CC: You knew the acting was over?
SK: Yeah. *(pause)* I thought I better kill myself, because I didn't know what I was going to do.

CC: Seriously considered suicide?
SK: Yeah. I had the car that I still have–a 1964 red Porsche convertible. And I thought the best way to go would be to drive that car off a cliff. There was a full moon. I sat there thinking that when you only want to be an actor, it's not only about your career; it's about your whole soul.

CC: You and the car are still okay.
SK: *(smiles)* Yes. We're in very good shape.

CC: If your acting career had been in 2007 would it have sustained itself?
SK: I don't know. You don't find a lot of longtime successes in situation comedy. I don't know that it would have been the kind of career I could have done and not had to do something else, too.

CC: At UCLA you co-founded the Women's Resource Center.

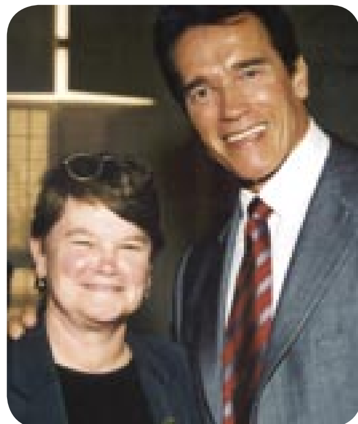
SK: Correct.

CC: It's now called the Center for Women and Men. What happened at UCLA that it evolved?

SK: In the '70s, there was no attention paid to the differences between women and men and what that means in terms of the services women need. It was the time when the State of California was providing medical insurance for its employees and they gave men everything they needed and they gave women everything men needed, and they called it equality. It went all the way to the Supreme Court and the Supreme Court said that was fine, because pregnancy was expensive. It was a time when the women's movement was just starting. I was in an office that advised student organizations, and it was very exciting. I advised the SDS, the Progressive Labor Party, the Women's Liberation Front, the Black Student Union…and at the same time we had no deans of color in the office. It was the beginning of the student revolution and a lot was happening.

CC: An era of almost constant change.

SK: Exactly. We were asking whether women students needed more out of the non-academic student services, which is what they called our whole area–housing, psychological, medical and student affairs. In the middle of a meeting, we decided to open a resource center. We just took a room in the library. My dad came in and painted it for us. We got our own furniture to make it a really comfortable place. Chancellor Young called us on the carpet, but he couldn't fire twenty middle management women for doing something that wasn't harmful to the Uni-



SHEILA LIVING A GOOD LIFE

versity. *(smiles–pauses)* It was a place for its time, but I think the reason it changed is because women who don't call themselves feminists anymore, don't particularly want to go specifically to a place that is just for women. They're sort of back into the equality means 'treat us the same' mode.

CC: Do young women understand the feminist movement?

SK: I don't think so, any more than I really understood the suffragist movement. You always take your rights for granted. You never know where they came from or who fought for them.

CC: Was the feminist movement a reform movement?

SK: I think feminism actually was a period of transformationalism. Much of the academic work went into the equal treatment/equal results discussion. I became an academician and taught classes about women and law and it was transformational, I think, in the ways we talk about difference. If you treat people the same, ignoring the fact that society already treats them differently, then you can't have an equal result. You only have equal treatment. So, what I think feminism actually changed was a lot conceptually, and then everybody that benefited from it had higher expectations. All these guys with daughters woke up around the same time and said, "You're going to keep my daughter from getting a job? My daughter's not going to get into graduate school because you don't think girls should go to graduate school?" A lot changed. I don't think young women really quite understand all the struggles, but I do think they understand their place is more equal because somebody complained.

CC: At 34, you decide to go to law school?

SK: Right. My students actually said to me, "You know what, Sheila, you're smarter than any of us, and you should go to law school, too, because you're never going to get to be chancellor of UCLA, because they're not going to let a woman do it."

CC: Was it your goal to be chancellor of UCLA?

SK: I didn't know what my goal was. I didn't have any goals. I've never had any goals. That is the truth. It's not all accidental. You have to put in the energy, but I never really thought, "Gee, I sure would like to be X."

CC: Did you want to be a lawyer?

SK: I needed an advanced degree and I didn't want to spend a hundred years writing a thesis. I took the LSAT and scored in the 99th percentile, even though I'd been out of school for quite a while. I didn't want to go anywhere but UCLA. Period. And I was turned down. Why?...because of grade inflation. I had a 2.9 overall when I graduated in 1962 and I was in the top 10% of my class. By the time I applied to law school in 1974, 2.9 was in the bottom 10% of the class. Professors were giving higher grades so nobody would get drafted for Vietnam. UCLA didn't take that into account and turned me down. This was the second kind of devastation. First, I'm not going to be an actor, and I'm devastated. But then, you know, it sent me off in a better direction. Then I'm turned down by UCLA. Luckily, this guy who is some kind of data manager at UCLA, and I'm convinced is my guardian angel because I only see him when I'm in trouble, says my 2.9 is really a 3.8 in current grade currency. He says go apply at other schools. So I did. I got into Harvard, I got into Boalt, I was wait-listed at Yale, and I was turned down again at UCLA. *(pauses, still clearly disgusted)* I stapled my acceptance letters together and sent them to the dean of law at UCLA. I said, "This looks like your problem, not mine."

CC: You didn't drive to the cliff this time.

SK: Not this time.

CC: You're 34 years old. What's your private life like?

SK: *(laughs)* You're going to dig a little bit?

CC: *(laughs)* We owe it to the reader.

SK: I had a partner from 17 years old until I was 29. Then we broke up. I thought well I don't really know anything about men, perhaps...*(laughs again)*–and I thought maybe I needed to learn something about men. So I was very promiscuous, mostly with men who worked at UCLA.

CC: Did you enjoy being with men?

SK: Very much, but that's sex, that's not love, and I didn't fall in love with any of them.

CC: What's the ideal man for Sheila Kuehl?

SK: There isn't one. You have to fall in love with somebody to have perfection.

CC: Physical attraction, what do you look for?

SK: Gosh, the thing about being promiscuous is you're also quite variegated, so I can't say. It was sort of

like if I liked them…I mean, it was a time of free love. It was very experimental. I never slept with anybody I didn't know though. That doesn't sound like a very high standard, but still.

CC: Do you look back on that period of promiscuity with any moral concern?

SK: No, not at all. I think you can engage in sexual activity with mindfulness and care, with affection, and it can't hurt anybody…when I went off to law school I was still dating men. My second year, I was totally celibate because I thought this is going nowhere. You can only be promiscuous for a short amount of time and then you say I need to meet somebody. And I didn't meet anybody, so I was celibate and on my own. I had a great year, actually. I entered the moot court competition at Harvard, and along with everything else my grades were great and then…*(puts her hands in the air)*…in my third year, I fell in love with a woman. I mean just crash and burn fell in love with a fabulous woman at Harvard. It was quite a good year and we were together for two years. She was not a person that commits, but I didn't really know.

CC: Do you keep in touch with the first partner?

SK: She's dead. She was a diabetic, and they didn't expect she'd live more than the age of 40. She lived to be 45, so it was a gift. We were friends to the end. Absolutely.

CC: You're certainly out now.

SK: Oh yes, everywhere in the world. I started being out because my next partner, about a year later, was Torri Osborne. Torri was quite active already in the fledging lesbian movement. There was no gay and lesbian movement, yet. There was a gay movement and there was a lesbian movement, which was lesbian feminism. Torri was a mogul in women's music that never made it on the radio but sold millions and millions of albums. She was in business school at UCLA and I was working right next door, and we had a mutual friend. We met, fell in love and we were together for almost nine years. She's my most important ex, I think…*(slower)*..she was my most significant…

CC: When did you come out to your folks?

SK: I was 39. When my second partner, the one I met at Harvard, left it was–I won't say ugly –abrupt and I was really broken up. I couldn't imagine since I loved my folks so much how I could hide being this sad from them. I'd have to not see them at all, and that was not an option. So, I invited them over for coffee. It took me about 15 years to make two cups of coffee. I didn't want to come out of the kitchen, because when I did I would have to tell them. I finally came out with two cups of coffee. They were like, "Honey are you alright?" I told them that my first partner and I had been more than just friends and that my second partner and I had been more than just friends and we had just broken up and I was really broken up about it. *(smiles)* My mother took my hand and patted it and she said, "That's okay, honey. We always knew you liked girls better." *(laughs)* It's kind of like you're inside your closet waiting to come out and they're all waiting outside the door going, "When is she going to tell us?" My parents were major league squares, as we used to say in the old days, but they just loved me so much, and they were not about to give up on me.

CC: It's interesting that the promiscuity was only with men.

SK: No, not really. After my second partner left and before I met Torri, but again it's a very short period of time, I was promiscuous in the lesbian community, but only with people I knew. *(laughs)* A lot of rules, you know.

CC: So, you graduate from Harvard at 37 years old and "feminist lawyer" seems to be the most common description of your next job. What is that?

SK: It's generally a person who is working on employment discrimination cases where the discrimination has to do with a woman or a class of women.

CC: For example, a woman doesn't get the principal's job…

SK: Yeah.

CC: Or a teacher gets fired because…

SK: Well, not just a teacher, but employment in any circumstance. I went into a law firm out of Harvard that did municipal law among other things, and it was just at the time of Prop 13 and suddenly what we were doing was telling cities how many lights they could turn off and how many people they could fire without getting sued. I didn't like that. I wanted to work on law that helped people. I went to work for a feminist law firm, which was two women in partnership–one of whom did family law and one of whom did employment discrimination law.

CC: Lucrative?

SK: No. Inadvertent pro bono, a lot. I never made money. I was probably not making enough even to live, just drawing on my savings and my retirement from UCLA. I went back to UCLA actually to work, because I was not making any money being a feminist lawyer. I went back to run the off-campus housing office, which I did for a number of years.

CC: Did Zelda help you in these endeavors?

SK: Not until I ran for office, although every time I would go do something, People Magazine would write an article about Zelda goes to law school; Zelda graduates from law school; Zelda is a law professor.

CC: Nine years after graduating you run for the Assembly.

SK: Right. I was working with a small group of people framing a domestic violence law in California. And, because I was a law professor, I was asked to come up and testify at the Capitol, where I had only been once as a teenage tourist. And I would sit and wait while committees rambled on and watch everybody and after a while I thought, "I could do this."

CC: Did you have a political base when you ran for the Assembly?

SK: Not a political base. I had the gay community, I had the women's community, I had everybody who had ever worked with me on domestic violence issues, I had some of the academic community, I had the state bar community and lots of lawyers because I'd been active in the state bar. You know, I like to do things. I belong to a lot of stuff, and whatever I belonged to I became the president or the chair or the chair of the board.

CC: The grown-up 7-year-old still taking charge.

SK: Well, yeah, exactly. I also knew enough people to raise $600,000 in my first primary from donations of $100 to $250.

CC: Tough race?

SK: We didn't know at the beginning. There were six guys running against me, but I love raising money, and they didn't. Most people don't. I went everywhere in the district and talked to everyone I could and I got 31%. The next guy got 11%.

CC: No retirement benefits in the Legislature.

SK: No retirement. It's very scary.

CC: Are you afraid of what the future holds?

SK: I'm not afraid yet, because I still feel healthy and I also feel my time in the Legislature has prepared me for a panoply of jobs.

CC: Again, you don't have a plan?

SK: Not yet. I mean, I have Social Security and I have a pension from SAG that pays me $700 a month, which gets me halfway to what I make now. My car is paid for, although my house is not.

CC: You had your car completely redone.

SK: I did, in 1990. It's a fabulous car. It's the one thing I have left from the acting days, none of the money, none of the beach house, nothing.

CC: Is there someone in your life now?

SK: There is not. I mean, not a partner. I think Torri was really either the love of my life or the love of my middle-life and it's very difficult to think about forming a partnership or a relationship when you're working at the Capitol Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and you're in the district Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I don't know. There might be a person for the older years.

CC: The relationship with Torri represented your married years?

SK: Oh, yeah. It was a marriage. They're all marriages. People just don't understand. It's the same thing. I mean, most of my friends have kids. Some of them had kids biologically, some of them adopted kids. You know the gay agenda is love and equality. *(sarcastic)* It's so dangerous, but that's all it is.

CC: You're termed out of the Senate in 2008?

SK: Yes, and what I'm thinking, honestly, is there are a great variety of things I might do. Antonio Villaraigosa has mentioned working for him in Los Angeles.

CC: Of course, *(laughing)* you could wait to see if Antonio gets elected governor–then there'll be a lot of opportunities opening.

SK: I could be Secretary of Health and Human Services or something for him. I don't want to sound cavalier, but you learn so much as a legislator–I've chaired and been on committees handling health care, water, natural resources, insurance, the budget…I mean you just know how things happen and I don't want to waste it.

STEVEN STILLS AND SHEILA; SHEILA AND FRIENDS; THE GROUP; FAMOUS FRIENDS

CC: Run again for office?

SK: I could potentially run for county supervisor. I have to work.

CC: Are you happy?

SK: I range between very contented and being very happy. On the days when I'm not happy, I'm still content.

CC: Is the State of California in trouble?

SK: It could be, because it doesn't really care about electing its leaders. We have TV ads and people say, "Oh, I didn't know that," like what they're watching is true.

CC: Negative campaigning is the norm now.

SK: Exactly. But, somehow the ones that do vote really do care. If you go door-to-door precinct walking you see people have stuff spread out on their tables and they're reading and trying to get through the bullshit to the truth. Maybe the voters can right the state. I don't think we're in trouble environmentally. I think we can easily pull out of that. I think the right-wing philosophy of starving the beast is so detrimental to 90% of the people. They've got the people fooled that somehow if rich people do okay, then everybody does okay. That's the big lie. The main thing I'm worried about in California is the Secretary of State's position because you have Florida in 2000, you have Ohio in 2004, and if we approve the voting machines being pushed in our direction it could be California in 2008. And, frankly, I really think that's what Karl Rove has in mind.

CC: I mean, really, when you think of the violence in the cities, transportation problems, corrections, urbanization, pollution, only 2.3% of the students who are accepted to UCLA are black…tampering with voting machines can't be your top worry.

SK: Well, it is because everything is changed by who our leaders are. What kind of budget do you get? What are our budget priorities? I mean, gangs are not a new thing, violence is not a new thing, schools not serving their children is not a new thing. Why did they get better and now they're getting worse? It's leadership and it's money. And where does leadership and money come from? It comes from who we elect.

CC: Would you run for Secretary of State?

SK: Probably not.

CC: What's been your greatest accomplishment as a legislator?

SK: There are three I'm most proud of. One is the protection of students in school against harassment or discrimination or violence on the basis of real or perceived sexual orientation. It protects all the kids, even if they're not gay and others just think they are. The second is nurse-to-patient staffing ratios, which I'm very proud of. And the third is paid family leave.

CC: And your ultimate goal?

SK: Universal Health Care.

CC: The big issue in 2007 for policymakers.

SK: Yes it is.

CC: Does Governor Schwarzenegger's new proposal get us there?

SK: No. Univeral Health Care means every Californian is covered with comprehensive insurance they can afford. The governor's proposal says you must buy insurance and it will often be bare-boned.

CC: Will you be in the mix negotiating the final result?

SK: Definitely. As Chair of Senate Health, I will be working with the governor's office, the President pro Tempore and the Speaker to incrementally expand coverage and, at the same time, I will move my own bill forward.

CC: I'll come back to catch up on the next phase of you life.

SK: I hope so.

A TRADITION OF HONOR

ASSEMBLYMAN ROGER NIELLO

In the 158-year history of the California State Assembly, only two desks have been retired. The desks remain on the Assembly Floor as a tribute to the service of former Speakers Jesse Unruh and Willie Brown. They will never be used by another legislator again.

Of course, according to Myra Turner, a special assistant to the Speaker and a rich resource of Assembly lore, another reason no one will sit at these desks is that the chairs have been removed. Ms. Turner also explained that the Unruh desk is an original. Willie's is a reproduction.

Term limits of eight years in the Senate and six in the Assembly beg the question if the day of the great legislator is passing us by.

California Conversations raised the issue with second-term Republican Assemblyman Roger Niello, who arrived in the Legislature with the resume that term limits was trying to attract–deep roots in the community, successful in business–in his case successful enough that any pay in the Legislature is a cut in his salary–and active in local politics.

Niello supports term limits, although he's concluded that a proposal to allow all 14 years to be served cumulatively in one house is reasonable.

However, it does not appear to Niello that there is a great deal of popular support for change. Citing powerful forces opposed to any alteration of term limits, he also says it would be a huge mistake to link redistricting and term limits.

California Conversations asked Niello if he thinks it's possible for someone in a term-limited environment to have the kind of impact where there is consideration of retiring a desk.

He laughed, saying, "Interesting question. Given that there have only been two desks retired in over 150 years of the state government's existence, I would think not."