

Interview Of Mary Kay Shields

A conversation with Mary Kay Shields and Jim Goenner

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Title: Interview Of Mary Kay Shields

Date: 09/11/2019

Length: 00:42:29

Interviewer: Jim Goenner

Founder: Mary Kay Shields

Location: Central Michigan University Education Bldg

- Jim Goenner: [00:08](#) Mary Kay Shields we are so grateful that you are sharing your oral history for the National Charter School Institutes Founders Library because you and I have done so much together and the one thing I know about you is so much of what you've done to advance choice and charters and better lives for kids. You didn't want anybody to know. And in fact you did a lot of your work behind the scenes intentionally so nobody would know. So to be able to capture this and share this, we're going to have some groundbreaking stuff and I'm excited. So thank you for being here.
- Mary Kay Shield...: [00:41](#) Oh, Jim, you're the only person I would do this for. Um, I learned a long time ago, there was a quote by Henry Kissinger that said that his effectiveness was diminished as soon as he became public and I always held on to that cause I didn't want it ever to be about, um, that, I wanted it to be about results.
- Jim Goenner: [00:59](#) So I remember first meeting you, you were Governor Engler's policy advisor for charter schools and boy, did you come in with a bang and you in fact had everybody in the charter schools movement at that time reporting to you every Friday via fax. Can you tell us about that?
- Mary Kay Shield...: [01:21](#) Yeah. Um, actually I was a stay at home mom and I had worked very much in the legislature, both the House and the Senate and I worked on the precursors to A, and so I, uh, I was very familiar with Governor Engler and he was very familiar with my work, so I knew the legislative process and, and whatnot. And so he recruited me. And it was interesting because on a Friday I was staying at home with my kids and on a Tuesday I was in a meeting and, um, it was reported, 'now she will be the governor's eyes, ears and mouth and what she says is what he says', and I'm looking in the room going, she, and I'm the only skirt in the room and I'm like, and it was the cabinet. I mean, he basically brought the cabinet in and he empowered me and he understood it was going to be a very tough, tough, uh, assignment and so he blessed me with the tools necessary, uh, which was his bully pulpit really.
- Jim Goenner: [02:12](#) So I did my doctorate at Michigan State University on the origin of Michigan's charter school policy. And you know, from a doctoral intellectual standpoint, I came up with a theory that said Governor Engler was a policy entrepreneur. Now we all think of entrepreneurs in the business world. They're willing to take risks and make things happen. But he really was that from a policy standpoint. And one of the things he told me in that interview was that you had to know the rules better than anybody else. You are somebody that took that to heart. You

studied, you read, you were always prepared. You knew the rules better than anybody else. How has that helped you get things done?

Mary Kay Shield...:

[02:53](#)

Um, I learned that actually in the legislature, um, because there are so many rules in, in how you proceed and it was a very tough, um, environment as far as the political partisans. Nothing like today. But if you knew the rules, then you could maneuver what you needed to do. And, and also that's part of who I am, which is you always follow the rules. So I wanted to make sure I, I didn't do anything that was, um, illegal or improper, but I wanted to push the envelope as far as what people, I didn't care about whether it was comfortable or not. I did care if it was legal. And so, um, and we knew this is a tough road. And so, uh, Engler I worked very well together and then when I worked for him, I learned even more. But much of it was observing him in the legislative when he was the leader in both the House and the Senate at one point. Um, it was, he was a master at getting things done by knowing the rules.

Jim Goenner:

[03:40](#)

So I remember, you know, the Governor Engler as like the governor, people were intimidated by him. Um, Doug Roberts, his state treasurer told me that he knew his stuff so well, but Engler knew it better. That, that was just how well read, how smart he was. But you could keep up with him. How did you do that?

Mary Kay Shield...:

[04:04](#)

I was probably foolish. Well, the first time I ever met him actually, um, I had been working very hard. I was, I was brought in, I was originally a teacher, so I came from the teaching ranks and was in uh, House of Representatives working there when 'A Nation At Risk' came out. And what, what would the response be from the State of Michigan, you know, how are we doing? And things were quite different back then. In my usual, I did my homework and this gentleman came in, I was in the, minority leaders office at the time and, and had been working on it all summer long. And this gentleman came in and started arguing with me, chapter and verse and, and we had covered a lot of things. It ended up being the PA 25, the School Improvement Act of 1990 which was very comprehensive, a lot of different areas. And this gentleman knew as much as I had, you know, but we like bam, bam, you know, and what about this, and what about that? What about this? And finally he walks out and they go to the, you know, representative Mike Busch. I said, who was that? And then he said, that was the Senate minority leader, John Engler. I went, Oh, uh, but I think at that point, and he told me he really appreciate the fact that I was one of the few staff people that he respected because I did my homework, like he

did his homework and we kind of, since then, um, ever since then, uh, had a mutual respect.

Jim Goenner: [05:14](#) He loves those exchange of ideas.

Mary Kay Shield...: [05:16](#) Yes. Yes.

Jim Goenner: [05:17](#) So 1995, I'll never forget, we had the Michigan Charter Schools Expo and you were in the governor's office. All the schools were there. Everybody was excited. I think it was the diamonds are shining, meaning charter schools are the diamonds and the Governor was late. And you called and said what?

Mary Kay Shield...: [05:37](#) Well, no, it was personal. Um, there's two offices for the governor. There's one that's the more ceremonial one in the Capitol. And then there's the one across the street, which is, um, the executive offices. And he was actually in the ceremonial offices and I did not know he was, um, in a very serious meeting that had gotten contentious and heated, which was maybe if I knew I wouldn't have done what I did, but I walked across the street and went into the office and basically said, you need to get him out of this meeting because we need him. There's 3000 folks waiting for him just up the street, cause that's where it was, walking distance and he comes out and he was pretty, you know, it was a heated meeting he was in and he's not one, he was very, he, I'd never heard him raise his voice. People do not know Governor Engler. I mean he was not, he was intense, but he was not ever, um, but he was pretty, little activated at the time and I'm like, you need, he also didn't have his contacts in and he never went anywhere without his contacts. So he's glasses on and I had his contacts with me, I carried them with me. I knew and I'm like, okay, you need to put your contacts in and you need to, you know, get down there right now. And he just looks at me and he goes, he goes, Mary Kay, I am the governor. And I looked at him, so what's your point? Get down the street, and he goes, "scoffs", and everybody in the room went, "gasps". And he did. He got his contacts in and down the street. But ever since then it was kind of the story that, you know, like, wow.

Jim Goenner: [06:59](#) That's been one of your gifts though. You've been able to say that to all sorts of people, from governors to others. You've just been able to break through and say, we've got a job to do, let's get it done. You actually are rumored to have helped bring President Bill Clinton to Michigan to do a joint session of the legislature. Can you tell us if that's true?

Mary Kay Shield...:

[07:21](#)

It absolutely, yes. Um, at that time I had helped work on this, uh, State of the State, which was a very intensive project um, when you work in the governor's office and you know, you have to have, with this governor, you had to make sure that not only would it get into the State of the State, but you need to be able to implement what your ideas were from the day it gets announced. So I had worked very closely on that, was a very large section was on education. The president at the time, um, he came out with a State of the State, um, State of the Union and I read his, and then I read the governors and um, if anybody looks at political history, back then was when there was, what they called the DLC and it was a Democratic Leaders Council, I think for governors, uh, that were more moderate. In fact, Governor Blanchard was part of that. And, um, the ideas for education were almost identical. And I went, whoa. I said, so I went into the governor and I said, we should get, you know, President Clinton. He goes, are you kidding me? I'm like, no, no, no, look at this. And he goes, you could go try, you know. But he was, he was like, okay. And so I did, I went to, um, I went to Washington, in fact it's kind of a funny story. I lost my luggage. Um, they didn't have it, so I had to bang on the door and I bought the exact same outfit at the store where I bought it from in Washington within 10 minutes to get to the President's office because I didn't have any luggage. But I'd come in there huffing and puffing and, old executive office and it was the President's education folks. And they were like, you're who from where? Governor Engler in Michigan. Cause you know, he was a pretty political governor as you know, they were savvy, both of them are very politically savvy. And I'm like, yeah, and I'm showing them this and that. Well, one thing led to another and it was the only time I think, um, in our lifetime anyways, that a president came and gave a joint, um, speech to our House and Senate. Uh, and you know, Bill Clinton, President Clinton was for charter schools, he was for opening up choice, he was for, you know, any way that we can individualize our help for kids. I mean very in step and um, I was kind of proud of that. But you're one of very few people to know how that happened.

Jim Goenner:

[09:23](#)

Well, I remember being there and it was one of the memorable experiences in my 25 years of being on this charter journey. But I'll never forget when I was doing my dissertation, I interviewed Lieutenant Governor John Cherry, Democrat, and he said to me, Jim, when President Clinton came, it was very hard for Democrats to be against our president and that, that had actually had a game changing impact on the charter rhetoric and trying to get things to be more bipartisan for kids. And so

thank you for your behind the scenes work to make that happen. It was a difference maker.

Mary Kay Shield...: [09:59](#)

It was fun.

Jim Goenner: [10:00](#)

Um, you did some other things in Washington. Michigan through what we called the Charter School Development Performance Institute, now we know it as the National Charter Schools Institute, actually got \$1 million congressional appropriation to help advance chartering and spread how to go about this work. Can you tell us how you helped move that along?

Mary Kay Shield...: [10:23](#)

Um, yes. At that time is very, and I'm not, um, cognizant now if it's the same way, but you'd have earmarks and it was very common and well accepted where um, local Congress men and women, wasn't a lot of women, but men could, um, have line items for what they believed was necessary in their home districts. So, uh, worked very much, uh, very hard and long with, at that time was representative Congressman Camp's office and Congressman Camp and he was very supportive of the charter school, worked very well with the governor and at that time I was working, actually with you at the Central, um, charter school office and we just worked really, really hard and was able to get the a million dollars for morphing this, cause the original intent of, it was actually a, um, a dissemination of information center mostly. And we knew we had to up our game in that we needed to have a source that we could train, um, primarily principals and school leaders, but train folks on all the different aspects of charter schools that they would not be able to get in a typical college or education program. They were not able to get it in their associations because they weren't welcome in the associations. And so we knew we had to take it from just a, what is a charter school to a much more, and you've taken it even many, many more layers up. But that was a great kicking off point.

Jim Goenner: [11:41](#)

It was. We actually ran a program called leading the business of charter schools and taught school leaders that whole broad spectrum that they have to be able to handle.

Mary Kay Shield...: [11:51](#)

The summer program. Yup. That was a precursor actually to the master's program here. So I'm pretty proud of that.

Jim Goenner: [11:56](#)

So I want to circle back. Um, a lot of times in policy and advocacy, people are excited about passing a charter schools law, but then it doesn't get implemented well. Part of your job was to actually make sure this law got implemented well. And

people said, well, how do you do that from Lansing? How does a governor that really cares about not just passing a law? How do they make sure it actually carries out to their vision? You played a seminal role in that. Can you tell us, because the Founders Library is not just about what happened, but it's also for people that are going to try and create the future and you actually have some of the greatest insight of how to create the future than anybody.

Mary Kay Shield...: [12:38](#)

Um, well first of all, again, going back to knowing the rules but also studying. So um, always, oftentimes people want to solve a problem before they really analyze what the problem is. And so you need to spend a lot of time analyzing the environment and the situation. And so what I spent a lot of time on was looking at the existing support systems and um, help in the way that traditional public schools received all different angles of help that was not available to charter schools and studied how they did it, right down to how, how did the MEA become so powerful and how did they do so well? How did, um, how do you support the current administrators? How did they get their training? Did a lot of research on that and then we said, okay. Then I said, we need to break it down to these are the areas that we need to replicate for charter schools, cause we don't have time to convince those who don't want to be convinced to open their doors to assist them. So that was the first part was identifying what we needed and how to do it. And then who are the key players? Cause again, the governor, um, I was very blessed to have the cabinet available to me. So who in the, in the was in the cabinet, in government, but also in other entities like CMU, that're willing to help. Could play different roles for those different programs in institutions and, and items that need to be created.

Jim Goenner: [14:05](#)

So governors and legislators, they have ideas, they turn them into legislation, they get 'em passed, they usually move on. How did you work with the governor to keep this such a important focus of the work?

Mary Kay Shield...: [14:20](#)

Um, Governor, Governor Engler hired me. I was special adviser, direct report to the governor, which was unheard of. And at that time I didn't know it was unheard of, but, um, he never, he's not a, a gentleman that would say somebody speaks for me or, or whatever. So first and foremost, he trusted me and, and we, um, we could finish each other's sentences philosophically. So he trusted that I would, uh, keep the fidelity to it. We had a very direct contact with him, very direct contact with, uh, those who worked for him. And oftentimes they would come to me and ask me to help them get what they needed with the

governor because they knew the governor was open to that. So he created a position. He empowered that position. Um, and I guess I'm just the type of person that ran with that position and we just use the power of the governor's office to say this will get done and we're going to hold you accountable.

Jim Goenner: [15:13](#) I think that's a really important lesson though, for future reformers. Not only getting something passed but then implementing it.

Mary Kay Shield...: [15:20](#) That's the hardest part.

Jim Goenner: [15:20](#) And finding people that you trust, respect and empowering them. That's a great formula. So one of the things that you did with the governor is actually had directives. They weren't suggestions, they were directives. Can you tell us about that?

Mary Kay Shield...: [15:35](#) Yeah, I actually have them here. Um, so when, when we did the, when I did the research on what was necessary and looked at the players and uh, they were already involved, cause there was already, I think about a nine month period where, um, different folks from different entities were supposed to be fulfilling things and they just weren't. And that was the other thing is, I can't help but be very blunt with the governor. And I was very straight forward and, and saying, yep, some of these folks may be your friends, but they're not serving you well.

Jim Goenner: [16:00](#) You always have had a sense of urgency,

Mary Kay Shield...: [16:02](#) Always. Right. Cause this is about kids. Cause that's the other thing is you have to remember what this is about. Um, I've always thought, and that has a lot to do with my faith, that it's not about the power of the position, the, um, you know, the name, the recognition, it's about the mission, and the mission, um, I was born and raised in Detroit and, uh, knew first hand how kids were not getting what they deserved. They were in schools that were not safe. They were not meeting their basic needs, much less their educational needs and it was taking away their future. And, um, um, special ed is another, I'm very, very passionate about that. And so that's what helped me be strong and helped me to be fearless because if we didn't move quickly, kids didn't stop growing. So that second grader wasn't gonna wait around till the legislature passed something five years later or, or whatever. And, and that really was one of the main reasons the governor sold me on charter schools cause he knew I'd been working on school reform. I was frustrated, I went home saying this is crazy, you know, and which is not true cause kinda like a freighter, if you look backwards you'll see that you

are making a turn but you don't feel it. Right. And so charter schools gave me the opportunity to do that. But you have to be strong. You have to be focused.

Jim Goenner:

[17:13](#)

So Minnesota passed the nation's first charter law in 1991. Michigan in '93, actually is the ninth state to pass a law. But in the early days, Michigan propelled up to the top and through the ranks very quickly. And I believe a lot of it actually has to do with the focus. And you were at the core of that, with those directives. Can you tell us more about what the directives were, how they came into place and how you think they propelled Michigan's movement?

Mary Kay Shield...:

[17:41](#)

It was very, um, strategic, um, very specific. And, uh, we brought in the top of every area that we needed. And so, um, you know, I have them in front of me but we looked at all the various areas and like for instance, you know, if you look at the finance, uh, finance needs, uh, we had um, we brought in all the players. Of course you prepare the environment ahead of time cause there were some players that we knew were going to be put aside and that that was not going to be, um, well received and shouldn't be done in a, in a large setting. Um, and some of them were very powerful people, but if you weren't getting the work done, you know, powerful people don't impress me. Sorry, but are you, are you serving our kids? That's what's, you know, and so obviously we did a lot of preparation but we brought everybody in to this meeting, it was on February 14th of 1996 and we basically assign them what they were to do. Very specific, very brief. Like for instance, like you could see on finance, I only have four objectives. They're very short, to the point. Cause, um, that's the other way you get things done. You have very clear expectations and very clear measurements. And then you have to have the fortitude to hold people to that and powerful people to that because, oh, that's another, you know, everybody likes to plan the work. This was an expression of, you know, Governor Engler he'd use all the time, everybody wants the plan the work, but nobody wants to work the plan. And so we were, we did a lot of work to create a good plan and we were not going to deviate from that plan. And when the folks were brought in, some of them were not even in state government, so they did not work for Governor Engler. But some of the folks at CMU, some others at this partnership at Michigan State University, others that were either receiving funds or deemed to help, were in this meeting and basically the governor assigned everybody and said, now Mary Kay is going to lead this and you will perform. Did you want more than that?

Jim Goenner: [19:34](#) So is it true you had them reporting into you via fax every Friday at noon?

Mary Kay Shield...: [19:39](#) Every Friday at two o'clock. I actually have some of the notes where if they did not, we, they would, um, I had an assist, I had a couple assistants that were assigned to me. She would call them by three o'clock and say, you know, tick tock, uh, you have until five and it annoyed some folks, but it made them, after a couple of weeks meet the deadline.

Jim Goenner: [19:58](#) Yeah, I remember sending those in. Um, across the charter school movement, facility financing, facilities and financing, been two of the biggest issues. Um, you did things back in the day to help address that issue. Can you tell us about some of those and actually even culminating in an executive order to create the Michigan Public Education Finance Authority.

Mary Kay Shield...: [20:26](#) Yeah, um, it started, I was at the Institute, the National Charter School Institute and we sought to get a grant for, um, that was available for unique financing program, um, that was presented nationally. We came up with a really great idea and concept and the other thing too is, is Governor Engler has some true friends that are brilliant and are willing to provide, you know, pro bono help. And Richard McLellan is one of those and so we were able to get a lot of work from Dykema, his law firm. And um, so we were able to get some extraordinary work there as a team that we could put together. So even though we did not get the grant, we said this, this is, this could work, this is really good. And so we took it to the governor because at that time I was not working for the governor and he said, yeah, I like it, let's put in an executive order. Uh, the problem was it was the end of his last term. And so we actually drew straws at Richard McLellan's office to see who was going to have to implement, cause we knew it was gonna not be pretty and I got the short straw. Yeah. So, um, we, they put me in the department treasury and we got up and going and in fact, I was going through some of my stuff and I got a wonderful email four years later from, uh, one of the bond attorneys that worked on that from Dykema Gossett. And he said at that time, we were literally, we call it the leper colony because they put us in a demolition area, the new governor did. Um, no heats, I mean, literally it was in demolition. I mean, there was crumbled up, um, construction and lights that were hanging and, and whatnot. And, but we stuck to it. And four years later he said it was the most productive authority in treasury. They had about eight at the time. And eventually they combined all of them because that authority that provides short term financing, and at that time they were providing some long term financing for charter schools, was the most prolific and

could, um, help staff the other authorities because it was moving so much need. So

Jim Goenner: [22:28](#) What I love about that story is so often people lament the challenges and the problems, you just did something about it. And it's made a difference for everybody. That finance authority, both short and long term financing for public school academies in Michigan's been a game changer. We're all indebted to you for that.

Mary Kay Shield...: [22:46](#) Oh, thank you.

Jim Goenner: [22:46](#) And you did draw the short straw and in fact it was hard to see you having to serve behind enemy lines if you will. And yet the one thing you could control was your attitude. You brought flowers, you brought a lamp, you made it work.

Mary Kay Shield...: [23:00](#) I actually went to target and I bought throw rugs and pillows and they had actually demolition. So I kind of leaned up the demolition of the um, portables and stuff. And I mean they had dead bugs and stuff and I, and I put on there real arts cause I love arts and I would put fresh flowers outside the office once a week because they weren't going to, um, they weren't going to strip away my, my, um, determination or they weren't going to bring me down. But it was hard. It was hard.

Jim Goenner: [23:29](#) But that's part of the story we want to capture through the Founders Library is these are real stories of real people given real sacrifices. I like to call it the blood, sweat and tears. But that example, for people that are studying this or want something in the future, we feel they really need to know what it takes, how, what you might call the sausage gets made because you can read about stuff in textbooks that sanitized, but you lived it. And those stories are really powerful. If you were advising somebody that's coming to do something big next in education, what would you tell them?

Mary Kay Shield...: [24:05](#) Well first I want to, I would say, is this what you're made for? Cause you have to believe in what you're asked to do. Um, because if you don't believe in it, if it's not your mission, it's not what you're made to do, you should go and do what you're passionate and what you're made to do because it's the passion that'll keep you going. Um, obviously you have to have tools, you have to have, you know, some resources and whatnot. But if you're in it because you want to make a name for yourself or you know, this is the popular thing. Um, I find those are the folks who run first and fastest when difficulties come. But when there's, when you truly believe that you're making a difference.

And that's the other thing too, as a leader, it's really hard. You have to constantly remind the folks that are working for you that are working really hard, but they're, they're usually crunching numbers or they're behind a desk or you know, they don't see what good they're doing and sometimes you just gotta say, Hey, let's go and I want to show you this school. Or, I want to see, look at these pictures of what this used to be and what it is today so that they get re-energized, that this really is about kids or whatever it is that you're involved in. And if it's, if you, if it's not about the mission and if that's not what you're made for, I don't think you're going to be successful.

Jim Goenner: [25:15](#)

So you were tested along the way in so many different times, but you actually get personal for a minute. You had to take a time out to take care of a sister. Can you talk a little bit about how did you manage that? A mom, a professional working for the governor, family. How do you balance all of that and, take on these Herculean efforts that you've done?

Mary Kay Shield...: [25:38](#)

Um, I was blessed first and foremost. I am blessed to have a great husband. So we're a team and we work together. Um, Governor Engler is somebody that provided flexibility when necessary. So I never missed, um, anything that my kids were involved in. In fact, I remember one time we were flying up to, um, a presentation up North and I was in the little plane that, the governor's plane and I was sewing something and he's like, what are you doing? I said, I've got to get the lights on and my, my son's Halloween costume, Halloween is tomorrow. You know, he's laughing. So, you know, you just make, do. Um, however it, it, it sometimes you have to know when you have to walk away. And, um, I had a dear sister, I loved dearly and she was mentally impaired and she developed breast cancer. And with my elderly parents, it was overwhelming because she had many, many doctors. And because she was mentally impaired, um, she didn't understand why people were hurting her cause she was constantly in surgeries, you know, basically they were cutting her away and, and she became then mentally ill and it was too hard for me to be in the high pact, impact, you know, you're like talking to mile a minute, you know, and you're doing this and that and this and then go half a mile down the street to the cancer ward and, um, try to help your elderly parents and your sister and you had to bring it down, you know, you had to like, [exhales] and it just got to the point where I, I couldn't do that. And um, so I don't regret that I did it and unfortunately lost my sister two years later to this. Um, but it was what I needed to do at the time.

Jim Goenner: [27:16](#) But then you came back and you did, I can't say more than ever because what you did with the governor and launching all of this stuff, we're indebted to you, but you also came back and then you worked with Central Michigan University, you worked with the National Charter Schools Institute, you worked with charter school partners, you've done so many things to advance opportunities for kids and educators in Michigan. What are some of your proudest accomplishments?

Mary Kay Shield...: [27:44](#) I think, well a lot of what you just said, cause you know, being able to help others help themselves, which is important and to maintain the concept of uh, communities can serve their communities best. Um, but I, I think what I've been able to work on a couple schools more personally where it can be right at hands-on. So one of them was a, um, was the design that we did with the Covenant House in Michigan, in Detroit, and we served, uh, homeless dropouts that were very, very challenged.

Jim Goenner: [28:14](#) And you know, that actually was highlighted today in the 74, um, through the work of Grand Valley and Covenant House and CM Joseph.

Mary Kay Shield...: [28:22](#) I did not know that.

Jim Goenner: [28:22](#) Tell us some about the stories around that. It was just such a powerful way to serve kids that are the kids that you know exists, but you don't think about in normal school.

Mary Kay Shield...: [28:34](#) Right. It was an incredible story how I even got the job. At the time, I, um, I did leave and work for a management company and um, a former Congressman and a lobbyist named Sam Joseph met with me for lunch and the former Congressman, um, beat the bejesus out of me in this lunch. I mean, it was like a, it was an excruciating lunch and Sam Joseph was just, just a wonderful man. But, um, I was like, well, you know, that was, this isn't gonna go anywhere, you know. And Sam Joseph, um, called me up two days later and he's, he's very soft spoken and he goes, and I love that he'd always say 'muddy gay. And he says, and I like, yes, Sam. And he goes, well it was Mr. Joseph, you called him Mr. Joseph. He's very proper. And, um, he goes, you know, you're the one, and I'm like, I'm the one what? He goes, I want you to help me build this vision I have. And I said, after that meeting, the material, the board didn't seem so, you know in tune, and he goes, no, I prayed on it. And, um, you know, he saw the mission and passion and heart, that's what I was talking about. And he said, that's what matters is the mission, the passion, the heart. And he says, I need that. And Sam was the calming. I was the one that did more of the, um,

negotiations because we were working in, um, in some tough areas. Um, I remember one time too, you talk about being a mom, my daughter was telling as an adult somebody the other day, um, you know, I didn't have a normal childhood. And I'm like, what are you talking about you didn't have a normal childhood. You had a great childhood, you know, and she says, ma, you call me, she was at U of M at the time and she was in the theater program and she said, you know, you call me and you said you weren't going to be able to make my performance because there was going to be a gang war, because we happened to be in an area of three different gangs. But then you call me later and said, Oh I can make it, cause they only brought bats. She says, mom, that is not normal. Oh, okay. I guess because we did deal with a lot. Um, but the, the, the joy of being able to see, I mean the families, the families would come to graduation like you've never seen before. There would be families of 20, 30 people sobbing, sobbing because their, their child who was so challenged before and into so much trouble put their act together and got their degree. I mean, so when you see things like that, you're like, okay, I'm good for.

Jim Goenner:

[30:52](#)

I love it. You call it mission, passion, heart. I say blood, sweat and tears. I'm going to go with mission, passion, heart. And that's what you've given to this movement. It's what you've seen so many others give. Do you think it's making a difference?

Mary Kay Shield...:

[31:07](#)

I do. Um, I don't know if it's making the difference that we thought on the broader sense. And that was one of the things that Governor Engler uh, sold me on. He said, in theory, I believe that this is going to be a game changer for all of public education of Michigan and this is going to improve, um, public education all across the board. However, if I'm wrong and you will be able to be part of something that'll save 500 kids here, 300 kids here, you know? Um, right. And so that was what convinced me and, and I know for a fact, I mean, I, you know, again, I'm from Detroit, more than 50% of the parents are choosing charter schools in Detroit. Our first major bar that we had for our children in Detroit was they were able to go to schools that were safe, that were clean, that were beautiful, respectful. People say, well, that doesn't, you know that at that time is well, what does that do for a test score? I'm like, I don't care about the test score right now. We need to treat them. We need to treat, they're children, my goodness, you know, the whole child. Feed them. We would provide laundry services for the parents because they couldn't, they couldn't keep clothes clean. Then we went into the education component, you know, not then, but side by side and now we're outperforming. The highest performing high schools in Detroit are all charter

schools that are open enrollment. I'm very proud of that cause they were the highest need and we're, we're delivering.

Jim Goenner: [32:33](#)

Well that's Maslow's hierarchy. You gotta get the people healthy to do the academic. Um, your biggest challenge? Biggest disappointment?

Mary Kay Shield...: [32:47](#)

I think my biggest disappointment, um, and why we're not doing as well as we could be doing now. I mean, we're not doing well in the state of Michigan is I wish we had back then when we were changing, we had these massive legislative changes that we had centralized the leadership and power of education in the governor's office or in one place. Not, uh, not, um, the way we have it now is the legislature is doing one thing, the state boards doing another thing and the governor's office is doing another thing. They change something every three years. You know, I, I my last, um, gig in this has been working on the front line with 30 schools. When you are in any organization, if you talk to any business person or mom and pop or whatever, if, if your rules of the game and what you're supposed to do are changed every two or three years, that is impossible because it takes time to figure out what you need to change in your system. It takes time to train the people, cause we've got great teachers, great people involved, but they need to be able to know what they're required to do and then give them time to do it. With the mechanisms we have now, it's um, you never know who's in control on the day and they're not together and I, and we don't have the business community. You know, we're not one voice. And if you look at, and I'll tell you, and I tell everybody, if you study, and I've studied this, you know, there are many States, it doesn't matter the plan, I don't care which one you pick. If it's Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota, those who have have done well, it's not so much the plan that they've done well, and it goes back to implementation, is that they had one focal point of what they're going to do. Everybody bought into it, including the business community. They supported it and they didn't change it. I mean, you know, some tweaks but not a major change. And that's my regret that we didn't fix that at the time. Um, my biggest challenge is, it was always hard.

Jim Goenner: [34:36](#)

But you know, you said earlier there's planning the work and there's working the plan. That's what I just heard you say, is that it's so important to stay unified and work the plan. You can't have constant change and churning. And we see that in individual schools. If the leader's turning over every year, you're not going anywhere. That having an aligned board and school leadership and authorizer, are really a winning formula.

Mary Kay Shield...: [34:59](#) Exactly. They all have to be on board to what is the mission of that school? Again, you go back to mission.

Jim Goenner: [35:04](#) So Mary Kay, you've been amazing in this. Um, I want to talk about one more thing. And that's money.

Mary Kay Shield...: [35:11](#) Mine or yours.

Jim Goenner: [35:11](#) Charter, charters in Michigan get about two thirds of the funding. You have deep expertise in school finance before you ever got into this thing with charters. And you've also more recently been on a statewide coalition trying to figure out school financing. Can you talk to us a little bit about what you've learned in this journey and in your most recent work on school finance and what do you think a solution for a better day is?

Mary Kay Shield...: [35:42](#) Well, a solution for better day, it goes back to can't we just all get along? You know, can't we just all stop and look at a child is a child is a child and you know, we in the days prior to A, and people, you know, sure A needs to be fixed, it was long time ago. But the good old days are not good. Okay. We had, um, grandparents who are losing their homes to high taxes. We have people giving up the rights of their children in order to be a better school districts and whatnot. And at that time it wasn't so much a partisan fight. It was, um, in formula versus out of formula, the haves and the have nots. And so we really strove to take care of that. Now it's become so partisan and we've gotten so far away from, um, even even at those days, didn't matter what party you were in, this and that, everybody was for the kids and tried to do their best for that. How we get back to that as a nation, as a state, as local communities is a much bigger, bigger question than I can answer. And it's, uh, it's, it's sad. It is just really sad and I can just only hope and pray we get back to that because without that, I don't know what the answer is. One major step with the latest with the finance group that I was involved with. First time they had charter school representation. It's the first time that every committee had 10% of the representation was charter schools. They asked me, and it was interesting because the gentleman I met from Oakland University, which, um, Oakland, uh, ISD, which hasn't always been, um, a big supporter of charter schools. Uh, they have a superintendent now though that was open to that. And the gentleman I met with and I said, 'are you sure you want me on this? Cause I'm not one to keep my mouth quiet and I'm gonna tell you what I think and I'm going to insist the charter school children are treated, treated equally.' And um, Nope. That's what we want. And they were very, very fair to that. And they were able to allow me to look at some of the drafts before they

went out. And you know, I read every line and every comma and whatnot. And there were some critical things that needed to be changed. So that was, that was a huge departure. It was a nice stepping stone that finally charter schools were recognized. However, I don't know if I have confidence on whether or not it's going to go there given the politics that we have today. Um, and it's a travesty. I also wonder if we were to have the money cause the, the buildings, you know, it's just such a challenge to find buildings and to be able to have the financing for that. All of that money is coming out of what traditional school districts have for instruction and we've been able to do better in instruction with less money. Just think how we would have been able to supercharge where we've gone if we had those worries of roof is going to go in or a boiler. I mean it was, it's, it's just such an unfair, um, but again, when you have passion, we have the community that supports something. Um, you can't put a price on that.

Jim Goenner:

[38:36](#)

That's really profound point that charters have to fund everything. Facilities, teachers, supply everything out of the state foundation grant or what we'd call the operational money, where on the traditional side they've got bonds and millage, they can levy taxes and all of that's taken care of. And that, that money is just for the instruction. So quite a disparity. So final question, you've been living this, it's been a mission, a calling. You've got a lot of experience and expertise, big picture, very detailed. What's your crystal ball say the future's gonna look like?

Mary Kay Shield...:

[39:15](#)

The crystal ball. You know, it's hard to say cause I go back to that bigger, um, the bigger sadness and unfortunate situation we're in is as a country and I just hope and pray that, um, we can get back to civility, that we can get back to getting along and that we can get back to solving problems. Um, it doesn't look hopeful right now. Uh, we, you know, we just lost a, uh, an incredible gentleman that was part of all of this. He was a legislator, you know, Don Gilmer and he came from the age of, um, I loved him equally as his counterpart and they, you know, we all work together. It didn't matter what party you were, it was about kids. So the future will only be bright if we could just put down, um, you know, technology is great. However, I think this, a lot of the stuff that's happening where people aren't face to face and you know, we used to be face to face, go have a beer, you know, talk about your kids and then you were civil to each other because you knew each other. But now when you can have faceless, nameless, name calling, um, it's, it's a bigger challenge that I know. Um, right now I'm just working on the folks I have around me. Try to be positive and try to you know, I

would challenge anybody, say if somebody says something negative about somebody and you know, that person just say, Hey, I know that person. I know their heart. I find that really hard to believe that that's what they meant and you know, maybe support each other more in a positive. Um, but on, on the global bigger sense. It's, we have to change. I don't know what the answer is.

- Jim Goenner: [40:58](#) Presumption of good will and persistence and fortitude. Mary Kay, you've been a delight and I want to connect a few dots for those that have been watching. So one of the Founders Library oral histories is from Will Marshall who played an instrumental role in that Democratic Leadership Council and the Progressive Policy Institute with President Bill Clinton and that connection. Um, two, I want to just highlight how you've impacted the Goenner family. Not only have you been a great wise mentor to me professionally, but our daughter Natalie is a Voyager at Renaissance Public School Academy. This is their second year there. As you know, Natalie came to us with the blessing of down syndrome and you through your work with CS Partners had a great impact on that school. But the culture, the spirit, the teamwork, the project based learning, she's thriving. She loves life. She loves to go to school. And we thank you for that and...
- Mary Kay Shield...: [41:56](#) That just made my day.
- New Speaker: [41:56](#) ... thank you for all you've done for the Michigan and National Charter Schools Movement and the rising tide that you've done to help lift all.
- Mary Kay Shield...: [42:03](#) Thank you.