

Interview with David Blanchette

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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A Note to the Reader

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DePue: Today is Friday, June 19, 2015. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm excited to have Dave Blanchette sitting in Tom Schwartz's old office, here at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.² Good morning, Dave.

DePue: You have been interviewed before by our program. I think that was in 2009.⁴ There's been a lot that's happened in your life, hasn't there?⁵



David Blanchette

² Tom Schwartz was Director of Research and Collections at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum beginning in 2005. His oral history interview can be accessed at atintatefoundallinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/OralHistory/historiansspeak/Pages/SchwartzTom.aspx.

⁴ Dave Blanchette's previous oral history interview can be accessed at [https://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/oralhistory/Organizations and Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/BlanchetteDavid.aspx](https://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/oralhistory/Organizations%20and%20Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/BlanchetteDavid.aspx).

⁵ Dave Blanchette's previous oral history interview can be accessed at [https://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/oralhistory/Organizations and Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/BlanchetteDavid.aspx](https://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/oralhistory/Organizations%20and%20Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/BlanchetteDavid.aspx).

Blanchette: There's always something happening in my life, Mark.

DePue: You were the long-time public information officer (PIO) for the presidential library and museum. Before it was that, it was the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (IHPA). I guess you've always had that title, even though the library museum was part of IHPA. To a certain extent, we're going to overlap with the interview you had with Julie Dirksen, back in 2009. But in conversations you've shared some interesting anecdotes that I think we need to dive into a little bit more, to better preserve the history of Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, and I appreciate your willingness to do that. Then there's obviously a lot to talk about since 2009 that's happened. I know that you just recently came off of working on the campaign for former Governor Pat Quinn [41st Illinois governor, 2009-2015].

Blanchette: Well, not the campaign but actually directly for him in the governor's office.

DePue: During the campaign season though?

Blanchette: Correct.

DePue: I'm looking forward to including that portion, as well, which fits better in our Illinois Statecraft project. Why don't you just give me a little bit of an overview of your early history and how you ended up working for IHPA. I believe that was starting in 1989?

Blanchette: Correct. The story starts in 1979, actually. I was studying journalism at MacMurray College in Jacksonville and was looking for a way to support myself, pay my way through college. There was an opening that came available at a radio station in Jacksonville, WJIL/WJVO. I spoke with the general manager, Ron Gray, and he said, "Yes, it's a news position. Would you be interested in doing news?" And I said, "That's what I'm studying to be, is a journalist."

I got the job at a radio station my sophomore year at college, so I was working as a journalist while studying to get a degree in journalism (laughs). It was interesting that a lot of the coursework I was taking, I had actually experienced that in my professional life. But I worked as a radio news director for about eight years.

DePue: Did you always want to be in radio or TV?

Blanchette: No. I just wanted to be in journalism, period. The fact that radio came open as a possibility, I just seized it. I'd never done a radio interview before, but people told me that I had a good speaking voice, and I would do fine. After a rough start of a couple of days, as anyone new to radio would do, I just kind of fell in love with the job.

There was a big problem with that though. Radio, then and now, is a very low paying profession. And having met my future wife several years into

being a radio reporter and realizing, if I want to help support a family I need to make more money than this, I started looking for jobs elsewhere. At that time, which would have been the mid-1980s, patronage was still king in state government. I had heard that state government was a good place to work—decent salary, good benefits—but if you wanted a job there, you had to go through local party officials for whoever happened to be in power. Well, James R. Thompson [37th Illinois governor, 1977-1991] was in power at that time.

I had a good relationship with then State Representative Tom Ryder. That relationship began the night Tom was chosen to succeed State Representative Jim Riley, who had been chosen to work for Governor Thompson. The county chairmen from the various counties in the district had met to select a successor to Jim Riley, and Tom Ryder was the surprise choice, a guy from Jerseyville. Very few people had heard of him politically.

I heard the name; I found his name in the phonebook. So I called him at home, and I said, "Can I get a reaction to you on tape about being chosen the next state representative?" And he said, "I've been chosen the next state representative?" (both laugh). So my relationship began with Tom Ryder at that point.

Also Vince Demuzio was my state senator, of the Democratic Party.⁶ He obviously wasn't of the same party as Jim Thompson, but he had a very good relationship with Governor Thompson.

So I approached both of them [Ryder and Demuzio] and said I'd be interested in working for state government in some sort of communications capacity. Well, a couple of months passed before I heard from Tom, who said, "Go talk to these people at the Illinois Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities," which is now part of DHS [Department of Human Services]. So I went in and had the interview, had a good interview, not realizing that the fact they told me to go talk to these people meant I had the job, that the interview was a formality, because patronage was still king. So I got the job as the assistant communications director at Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, working for David Devann. He was an old communications pro. He had worked for the federal government, and he had City of Chicago connections, and I learned a lot from him on the job.

But just one anecdote from those years, a couple of anecdotes. The first anecdote is, I was sitting in my office a few weeks after getting the job. We had a lot of clerical help. It was in the Stratton Building, so I had an office on the ring of one of those big office areas. And the clerical folks sat out in the

⁶ Vince Demuzio was a Democratic member of the Illinois Senate from January 1975 until his death in April 2004. During his time in the Senate, he represented various portions of southwestern Illinois. At the time of his death, he was the most senior member of the Illinois Senate. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vince_Demuzio)

middle. This beautiful young woman walks in my office and throws two Jim Thompson fundraiser tickets on my desk. I look at them, and it's for something I'd always wanted to go to but could never afford to go to because they were big blowout parties, great places. They were legendary. I said, "Thanks, I could never have afforded these tickets to go to this thing!" She kind of gave me a smile, and I heard people snickering, out in the office.

I went back to work, typing. I looked, and she's still standing in the doorway smiling. I said, "Thank you very, very much." That's when the clerical people started howling, just outright howling. And she says, "You don't get it, do you?" I said, "Get what?" Then she explained to me that part of getting a patronage job is you've got to buy or sell fundraising tickets for the party. So that was my introduction into the world of patronage in state government (laughs).

It wasn't long after that that the *Rutan* lawsuit, you know, was heard, and then the rules completely changed.⁸ But it was just... I could not believe I was so green behind the ears that I did not realize what was going on (laughs).

DePue: A seasoned reporter who hadn't figured that part out, huh?

Blanchette: I had not. And it just delighted the people, the clericals, delighted them no end. They still talk about it to this day when I run into them.

The other was the Department of Mental Health, as you can well imagine, as a human service agency, lots of deaths and sexual assaults and arsons, they're... Constantly your phone was ringing, and you're getting emails and personal visits about problems and crimes and deaths and abuses. My contact with the Governor's Office—because every communications person has to let the governor's office know, "Here are the calls we're getting. These are the calls the governor is likely to get if he goes [and] visits these places"—My contact in the governor's office was a person on the press staff named Susan Mogergerman. That was my first introduction to Susan Mogergerman, who I would later work for at the Historic Preservation Agency. That's kind of two anecdotes from Department of Mental Health days.

But after two years of doing that, I really got tired. It really wears you down, always talking about negative things. It was a great agency. They did what they could, but it was... So I went back to Tom Ryder, and I said, "You know, I like the job, but if there are openings anywhere else, I'd like to give it a shot, something that's not human service, not state police, not something that deals with death and destruction." He said, "There is like a second banana position at this place called the Historic Preservation Agency. They deal with historic sites and historic laws and everything." I said, "It sounds interesting."

⁸ *Rutan v. Republican Party of Illinois* was a Supreme Court decision that held that a government entity is prohibited from basing its decision to promote, transfer, recall, or hire low-level public employees based upon their party affiliation. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rutan_v._Republican_Party_of_Illinois.)

- DePue: Second banana to the public relations officer?
- Blanchette: Public relations officer, who at that time was Mary Gayle Cullen. So I went and interviewed for the job and got the job. That was in... I started, I think, the first week of December in 1989.
- DePue: I'm going to ask you a couple of questions, jumping way back here. It occurs to me you got interested in journalism in college, and that was the time period that so many people were fascinated with journalism because of the Watergate era.⁹ Did that factor into it for you?
- Blanchette: Not so much. It did, once I made the decision to be a journalist. See, I always have been an avid reader of fine literature, still am to this day. So I began college with the thought that I was going to be an English professor, so English was my major for my freshman year. And then, interestingly enough, my advisor at college, who was an English professor, said, "You don't want to do that" (both laugh). And he says, "How about something in the same vein?"
- He happened to be the advisor for the daily school newspaper. So he got me turned on to the world of journalism, and I never looked back. But then once I got into journalism, obviously, the Woodward-Bernstein... Everybody saw that as what journalism should be.¹⁰ Still to this day, I think, that's held up as the standard because that's the period when you really started seeing journalists as the watchdogs. You got your muckrakers in the Theodore Roosevelt years. But journalists actively being the watchdog for the public began with Woodward, Bernstein in the Nixon years.
- DePue: But that meant that you were a print journalist, a newspaper journalist, and that you were an investigative reporter, having much more latitude to do in-depth stuff. I would think radio news is quite different.
- Blanchette: No. Radio actually... Aside from packaging the stories in a much more concise manner, I covered radio stories the same way I would do as print, you know, digging, getting to the meat of the situation. There are a few differences, making the stories shorter, making them snappier, grabbing the public's attention right away, picking out shorter snippets of interviews to put in. So radio journalism is the same as print journalism, it's just you're in more of a hurry with it.
- DePue: There's always a deadline, regardless of what path you take in journalism though, isn't there?
- Blanchette: Right. It was a great job. I mean, there are a ton of stories that I can get with that alone, but we're here to talk about state government (DePue laughs).

⁹ Watergate was a major political scandal in the U.S. during the 1970s that led to the eventual resignation of President Nixon, thirty-seventh U.S. president, 1969-1974.

¹⁰ Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein were investigative journalists who did much of the original news reporting on the Watergate scandal.

DePue: The next question is that you initially got a job, and you were forthright to mention it was a patronage kind of position because that's the way the State had worked for decades and decades, probably all the way back to the mid nineteenth century.

You got a job through Tom Ryder, so I guess you were identified as a Republican. Was that truly your political leaning at the time?

Blanchette: I was kind of an independent at that time, being fresh out of college, probably had more liberal tendencies. Since that time, I've come to consider myself a Republican, but yes, you had to register as a Republican. So I've never really let that registration lapse. Even when I worked for Democratic administrations, I made clear they knew that I was a Republican. And both Democratic administrations, Blagojevich [40th Illinois governor, 2003-2009] and Quinn, said, "That's okay with us. As long as you get out our message and push our message the right way, we don't care what political affiliation you are."

DePue: Very good. And people know in Illinois because, as you said, you have to register to vote in the primary [that is, Illinois has closed primary voting].

Blanchette: Right.

DePue: So you're now working at the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, December of 1989?

Blanchette: Correct.

DePue: What was going on in the department at that time?

Blanchette: Well, when I first arrived, my office was in the basement of the Old State Capitol.¹¹ I had a desk set up with the stacks kind of on one side of me and the maintenance department on the other. They didn't have room for me up in the office area (laughs). So for two months, I cranked out news releases by typewriter in this little area in the basement, with very little human contact, except when I would literally run up the stairs to drop off the news releases I had typed up.

About the end of January—I think my memory's correct on that—the head public information officer, Mary Gayle Cullen, moved on to greener pastures, and they offered the job to me, and I took it. So I was then the lead PIO for almost, I think, about twenty-five years, almost twenty-five years with Historic Preservation Agency.

DePue: You got a new office and a computer.

¹¹ The Old State Capitol, in Springfield, Illinois, was built in 1837–1840, served as the state house from 1840 to 1876, and is now a state historic site and national historic landmark. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_State_Capitol_State_Historic_Site.)

Blanchette: No, we didn't have computers at that time. We still did things by typewriter and snail mail. That's how you got the news releases out. Didn't even have a fax machine.

DePue: Again, this was 1990, you said.

Blanchette: Right.

DePue: Where was your office then?

Blanchette: It was in the upper...not upper level of the Old State Capitol, but the office area of the Old State Capitol, which is one level beneath the public area.

DePue: In other words, in the basement underneath the Old State Capitol?

Blanchette: Correct.

DePue: What did you think about that arrangement, for a location for the historical library?

Blanchette: It was less than ideal, and I think that's part of what caused people to think about the idea of a presidential library and museum, that and the money that Judy Baar Topinka, who was then a state senator, was able to secure. She secured it for a new display case for the Gettysburg Address, which at that time was displayed periodically, underneath the staircase in the public area of the Old State Capitol. But it was less than ideal conditions for the existing historical library, coupled with Judy Baar Topinka's getting the \$50,000 for a new display case for the Gettysburg Address, added to the fact that people like Julie Cellini had always been thinking about, what can we do to make this institution a world-class institution? Well, it is a world-class institution, but what can we do to make it more public? What can we do to get the world to see this is what we have here?

So I think this perfect storm of things just started to happen at that time, just kind of coming together. And that was really the birth of the [Abraham] Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

DePue: But it's going to be a long labor process, isn't it?

Blanchette: It took a long time, and it was **extremely** painful and circuitous and torturous (both laugh) for all of us involved. I was just a very small piece of it. I was involved in publicizing everything we did. Also I was one of the people who were kind of the pied pipers, who'd go out to community groups and say, "Here's why we need this thing we've never had before, in [a] time of budget crisis for the State of Illinois, and here's what you can expect if we get it." There were a handful of us that would go out and talk about that. But, as far as dealing with the press about it, I was pretty much the only person that did that.

DePue: You describe yourself as a small cog. That's not the term you used, but the position you had gets you pulled into all of the various controversies and issues.

Blanchette: Anything that is going to reach the public through the news media, I was involved in, whether it be proactively or reactively. Ideally you try to get out ahead of the message. That's always the goal for a PR [public relations] person. But sometimes the message catches up with you (laughs).

DePue: What I want to do next is give you an opportunity to give a bit of a character sketch of some of the key people who were there when you first got started. Let's start with the name you just mentioned, Julie Cellini.

Blanchette: Julie I met, probably the first few weeks on the job. She at that time was chair of the IHPA Board of Trustees and, indeed, served as chair for a long, long time. [She's an] extremely personable and passionate person, and has since, almost from day one, become a close personal friend, as well as a very trusted colleague. It's no exaggeration to say that the IHPA and the Lincoln Presidential Library Museum would not exist as they are today without Julie Cellini. You can't put enough emphasis on that.

She had the political connections, but also the savvy, the know-how, to know how to use those connections to get done what needed to be done. And she was not afraid of making the tough calls and the tough decisions and calling people up at all hours of the day and night, whether it be from a worker bee to a U.S. senator or anyone in between. She and her husband, Bill, [are] just passionate advocates for Illinois history in general.

DePue: You mentioned that she had the political connections. So we might as well lay out the source of her political connections.

Blanchette: I believe her husband either worked for or did campaign work or probably both for a number of gubernatorial administrations.

DePue: I know his start, he was the first director of the Department of Transportation for Richard Ogilvie, [35th Illinois governor, 1969-1973] back in the late '60s.

Blanchette: Yeah, he had some definite connections, which of course, he was able to share with his wife, and they made good use of those connections, for the agency's sake.

DePue: He's had the reputation for decades of being one of the most influential Republicans in Central Illinois, perhaps the whole state, in terms of fundraising and things like that. How would you describe his personality, whether or not he was helpful with the agency and with Julie's focus and passion about it?

Blanchette: He was equally as passionate, and he was very supportive of Julie. As far as I could tell, whenever she would go to him with a problem, he would say, "What can I do to help?" or "How can I help you accomplish this?" I dealt more with her than him, but in the times when I dealt with both of them together, they seem to be in sync with one another. They had the common vision that this is the direction it needs to go. He may interject, "Well, I'll talk to [so-and-so] about that," or "I think I know how we can do that."

Without really going into a lot of detail, a lot of people that have—and I've seen this throughout my government career—those who have true political influence generally don't let out their secrets about the minutia of how they go about getting people to change their minds or getting people to do things. They say general things like, "I can think I can help," or "I think I know how I can do that," or "I think I know who I can call." But they don't say who, and they don't say how. That's how Bill was. I came to see that as a trademark of... Those that like to drop names, those that like to say, "Oh, well, I did [this and this and this and this]," generally are those who want to be influential but who really aren't yet. Those who truly are influential don't have to go into a lot of detail. You know they're influential. When they say they think they can help, they generally mean it. That's the kind of person that Bill was, and is.

DePue: Susan Mogerman. Shortly after you got there became... Well, let's wait for that one because that's another part of the story, I think. Bob Coomer.

Blanchette: He, at the time that I joined the agency, was head of the Historic Sites Division. He looked at the various historic sites and the people that ran them as family. He was very personally interested in not only their sites and keeping them the best they could be and having them operate the best they could be, but he was also interested in the personalities that ran them and the personal lives of those people. You could mention any site in the State of Illinois, and he'd say, "Oh, [this person] runs it. He's married. He's got [this many] kids. [These] are his hobbies. [These] are his strengths; [these] are his weaknesses. [Here's] his special events."

Bob Coomer was the quintessential historic site manager. You talk about passion about historic sites, we would have frequent staff meetings at Historic Preservation Agency, and if Bob thought the historic sites were being shortchanged, he would become angry and loud. We would call him "Boomer Coomer" (both laugh) when he would lose his temper. But it was always because of an abiding passion for historic sites and the people who run them. He truly was looking out for the people that ran the sites and for the sites themselves.

DePue: Michael Devine. I believe he would have been the director of IHPA when you came on board.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: Your opinions of Michael?

Blanchette: I didn't get to know Mike that well. He seemed like a very capable historian. As far as a manager, I'm not quite so sure. I didn't deal with him directly that much. I always dealt with, typically, Susan Mogerman, who was the deputy director, more than Mike Devine, so I didn't have a lot of direct interaction with him. I heard about what led to his ultimate demise, and I saw evidence of that at events later on. But I don't really have a strong opinion of the man.

DePue: Can you share his demise? Can you give us a little bit of background on that?

Blanchette: I wasn't in on this, but I heard about it shortly after it happened. Apparently there was some budgetary difficulty for the Historic Preservation Agency. Something was left out of the appropriation bill or some such thing, and the fix had to do with Mike Devine going before a legislative committee and saying a certain thing. Everybody agreed that that's what he would say, and everybody was cued up that this is what's going to happen. It's a mere formality; he'll go; he'll say this; everything will be okay.

Well, he got to the legislative committee and didn't do that. I don't know the exact details of it. I wasn't involved in the discussions or the hearing, but Governor Thompson, who stuck his neck out on this, to get this whole thing set up and to make things okay, became furious with him. I know he became furious because Susan Mogergerman, the deputy director, had been on the phone with Governor Thompson and immediately walked out of her office and said, "Oh boy, I just got this phone call from... Oh boy, is he mad" (laughs). So that, I think, was the beginning of the end of the directorship of Mike Devine.

DePue: And I know that Susan—let me look here quickly—became the director, it looks like October of 1990. So you wouldn't have been around too long, about a year, when all this happened.

Blanchette: Right.

DePue: You don't know specifically what Michael was supposed to say, versus what he actually said?

Blanchette: I don't recall it. I'm sure those notes exist somewhere. But it had to do with appropriations and budgetary matters. It was just to correct an oversight in the budget, and it was supposed to be a mere formality, and it turned out to not be. People had to really scramble to fix it after he didn't do what he was supposed to do or what he had agreed to do.

DePue: You believe that Governor Thompson had direct involvement in helping make sure that Susan Mogergerman became the next director?

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: And your impressions of Susan?

Blanchette: Susan was extremely savvy. She came from working for...working directly for the governor. Having worked directly for the governor in the same capacity that she worked for a governor, I can tell you that you are involved in many, many decisions, and you know exactly how things work, and you see things behind the scene. She came to the position with the knowledge of how to get things done, how you...

DePue: She started with Thompson as the assistant press secretary, working for Dave Gilbert. So you two had a similar background in that respect.

Blanchette: Very similar, and we spoke the same language. It was great working for Susan because she knew exactly what I needed, to do my job well. And, as director, she knew how to get things done politically.

As a for instance, when we were working on the presidential library and museum, every election cycle she would either do it herself or direct someone to do it, to reach out to the candidates from both parties and say, "If you're ever interested in taking a tour of our Lincoln collection, our state historian, Tom Schwartz, would be glad to show you what we have, be glad to show you why it's important that we safeguard..." So you've got the candidates for governor, from both parties, who are getting the tour of the Lincoln collection, which at that time was underneath the Old State Capitol. So, before the election even happens, they're vested in the idea that this is the presidential library; this is why we need it; this is why it's important; these are the treasures that we have. And that worked wonders.

DePue: All of this long before there was a presidential library.

Blanchette: Right, correct.

DePue: Did most of these candidates take her up on her offer?

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: Why do you think that was the case? They'd be busy people, trying to get themselves elected.

Blanchette: Think about it. When you're given the opportunity to actually put on white gloves and hold the Gettysburg Address, there ain't very many people on earth who are going to refuse that.

DePue: Certainly not people like Jim Edgar [38th Illinois governor, 1991-1999], huh?

Blanchette: Certainly not.

DePue: Hartigan? Do you recall Neil Hartigan? That would have been Edgar's opponent in the 1990 election.

Blanchette: Yeah. I don't know if he actually ever did it. I know the invitation was extended to him, and I know that when George Ryan was running, and I think it was Glenn Poshard that he ran against, they both took advantage of the opportunity.

DePue: How about Dawn Clark Netsch, from the '94 election campaign?

Blanchette: I don't recall if she did or not.

DePue: You mentioned another name I wanted to ask you about. That's Tom Schwartz.

Blanchette: I met Tom... He's probably one of the first library folks that I met. I remember vividly, the very first involvement I had with Tom on a media issue

was the Gettysburg Address, which had been on display periodically for the public, underneath the staircase at the Old State Capitol. Tom, as the safe-guarder of that document, as the curator of the Lincoln collection—that was part of his duties as state historian—thought that it had been on display too long and needed to come off display, to give the document a rest for preservation purposes. So he just took it off display and put something else in there.

When the public noticed that the Gettysburg Address wasn't there anymore, the press got hold of that. All of a sudden it became a national news story, "Gettysburg Address off display for an indeterminate amount of time" (laughs). And we had the morning shows here; we had the wire services here, all doing stories. We worked out a PR stunt, which actually worked rather well, where we had Tom... We had all the cameras rolling in the Old State Capitol, and Tom came out with his white gloves, carrying the Gettysburg Address. We actually had him put it back on display in this display case using the white gloves, and they got close-ups of the white gloves carefully placing it in the display case. Then Tom just walked away.

You could tell that he realized it had to be done. He wasn't happy (laughs) about doing it, but he realized it needed to be done for the PR. This got us some vital—by accident, really—got us some vital PR that we needed early on in the development of the presidential library and museum. We just kind of lucked into it, the fact that these events just kind of happened the way they did.

DePue: At the same time, Tom got to learn a lesson about what the public needs to be informed of in certain circumstances.

Blanchette: Well, when you work at an institution that's underground, and not a lot of people know where it is, it's kind of hard to realize just what the public's thinking, what they want, what their interest is. But Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, these are things that virtually every American knows about or thinks they know about. I knew right away that we had a story on our hands here. The only question was, do we take this lemon and make lemonade out of it, or do we just let it eat at us and eat at us? And I think Susan Mogerman and I talked this over and thought, Well, let's just put it back on display while the cameras are here, take advantage of this national publicity. So we did, and Tom went along with it.

DePue: Just getting to the level that it becomes national press, do you have an understanding of how that happened?

Blanchette: Yes. Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, can't see it anymore (laughs), three things. If you're an assignment editor in New York or Washington, DC, this is the land of Lincoln, the iconic document that's associated with Lincoln's name. You're in the land of Lincoln; you're in the place that he called home, and all of a sudden you're telling people, "You can't see this anymore." That's their view of it.

DePue: And it doesn't matter to them that it's hardly viewed by very many people at all because it's stuck underneath the Old State Capitol in a musky old place?

Blanchette: No, it's news. You're all about headlines, and that's a headline. Even if you come and you get the true story, the headline's still going to say, "Gettysburg address off display." Sure, down in the story it's going to say, "But state officials say it will come back." But it's still a story.

DePue: The good part of it, from your perspective, was that getting some publicity that, let's face it, being displayed underneath an old state capitol next to a parking lot is not the ideal location for it?

Blanchette: Yeah, that did help. It opened the public's eyes to what we have here and the fact that it was not displayed to its best, to best effect. So that definitely helped us. But, like I said, we tripped and fell into this publicity. We didn't plan this (laughs), but we took advantage of it, to turn it around our way.

DePue: This is probably the good time then to interject this detailed story about Judy Baar Topinka's involvement with the display case for it.

Blanchette: Yeah. Judy Baar Topinka, one of many big Lincoln fans, she was a state senator at the time. She had seen the Gettysburg Address. This display case, if I can describe it for you... The Old State Capitol has a wonderful staircase that comes up from ground level at the north and the south sides and then splits and goes to the east and the west, about halfway up the first floor. It's a wonderful display case, great architectural feature. Well, underneath that staircase, in a bulletproof case, was displayed the Gettysburg Address.

Now, in order to see it, you had to climb a little step and look directly down into the display case through one-inch thick bulletproof glass. And there was not a lot of light underneath there. In fact, curators said, you don't want to put bright light on it because that can degrade the document. So you're kind of standing on the step, looking down through one-inch thick glass in an area that's not lit very well, at one of the most important documents in American history. She had done that, on numerous occasions.

DePue: She had actually seen that?

Blanchette: She had actually seen it, yeah. It was during the appropriations process, where every legislator gets a chance to put in what they call pork, which is special project money that can either serve constituents or things you're really interested in. And she got \$50,000 put in for a new display case for the Gettysburg Address. I'm sure Judy, being Judy, the show person that she was, had in mind that her name would be associated with Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address. And indeed it was, because that proved to be the genesis for the funding that we would later get to develop the bigger picture facility, which was the Lincoln Presidential Library Museum.

Now, we had been thinking about a library museum for quite some time, but actually realizing there are some legislators out there that will put

their money where their mouth is, the first time that happened was with Judy Baar Topinka. So that proved that not only is this a good idea, but it might have some financial legs to it, as well.

DePue: Was there a new display case built with that money?

Blanchette: No. We went back to her and said, "Rather than do this, can we use this as part of planning for a bigger facility, presidential library"—at that time just library—"for Abraham Lincoln?" She was very enthusiastic about that. She said, "Oh, sure, I get it; I get it. Let's... I'll work with you in any way that you want, and we'll go after the bigger thing."

DePue: This might sound like a pretty obvious thing, but I'm going to ask you. What is it about Abraham Lincoln that can garner this kind of enthusiasm and support?

Blanchette: Tom Schwartz and I talked about this all the time. I think you sum it up in a few key phrases. He's the quintessential American success story. He rose from dirt-floor poverty to the highest office in the land, very little formal education, the epitome of the self-made man. Through herculean efforts and intense personal suffering, he helped keep a nation together that was coming apart at the seams. And at the height of his success and popularity, he was struck down by an assassin's bullet, so he was not even around to take credit for everything that he did. This kind of sums up Lincoln's life. Because of that, he's this enigma.

What would Lincoln think? What would Lincoln do? We don't know. And because there's so much we don't know about Lincoln... Everybody knows a Lincoln story, or thinks they do, but yet we don't know the whole story because he was struck down before he could do his oral history interview with Mark DePue (laughs) or anybody else. It's all of those reasons, the first martyred president, the self-made man, the fact that he proves that in America you can be anything that you want to be, as long as you have street smarts and ambition, plus his life is just surrounded by tragedy, including the great national tragedy that was a civil war. There was a more succinct explanation to it, and I think that probably occurs in *Lincoln's Eyes* at the current Lincoln Presidential Museum.¹³ But that's why. It's a fascinating story. You couldn't make this up; it's too good a story.

DePue: Yeah. It sounds like, when you were just listing all those things and talking about this, that you had the opportunity as public relations officer to say exactly that many times over during your career.

Blanchette: Quite a few.

¹³ *Lincoln's Eyes* is a short film presenting the personal and political dramas and key issues of Lincoln's presidency. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln_Presidential_Library_and_Museum.)

DePue: The other thing I would add as a historian is there's no more important historical event in American history than understanding the Civil War and reconstruction era, the events that led up to the Civil War, and it's Springfield's own.

Blanchette: Uh-huh, correct.

DePue: So you've got \$50,000. I've been interviewing Julie Cellini, as well.¹⁴ She'd been working on this for almost a decade already, just trying to get somebody to pay attention to the idea, let's do something more for Lincoln. So, that's kind of the first significant step in that process?

Blanchette: I would say yes, but that's with my PR glasses on, because Julie had been working behind the scenes, trying to line up support. That wasn't in the public eye, but this was the first really public thing that got people to start thinking, Yeah, maybe we do need this.

DePue: Were there drawings [architectural or artistic renderings of the building] that occurred after that, as well?

Blanchette: No. What we had to do... By then Jim Edgar was governor, and somebody had to convince Jim Edgar that this was a good idea. Now, before he was approached, we all knew that he came in with a platform of reducing state government expense, eliminating the budget deficit, cutting budgets, cutting back, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, lower, lower, lower. How do you go to a state leader who has that kind of mindset and say, "We want to talk to you about something we haven't had for over 100 years. We've done fine without it (laughs), but we want to spend millions of dollars on it anyway. And, by the way, we know you're cutting budgets everywhere else, but can you give us millions more dollars to develop this thing?"

Well, luckily he was a history major at Eastern Illinois University and a very big Lincoln fan. So, he got it. To his credit, he **got** what we were trying to do. It was because Jim Edgar was onboard almost... Julie may have a different take on this. My impression was, as a PR guy...because I was brought in after Jim Edgar was onboard with it... I don't know how long it took to convince him that this was a good idea, but once he thought it was a good idea, he was very personally involved in a lot of the early decisions. In fact, I was in some meetings where he was present, where his passion for this was very evident.

DePue: But 1991 was a small recession, a \$1 billion deficit he's got to fill. And, as you well know, he got a couple monikers, some names attached to him in that first

¹⁴ Julie Cellini's interview can be accessed at found [www.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/OralHistory/Organizations and Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/Cellini,-Julie.aspx](http://www.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/OralHistory/Organizations%20and%20Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/Cellini,-Julie.aspx).

couple of years, Governor No and Edgar Scissorhands (Blanchette laughs) were a couple of the two more colorful ones.¹⁶

Blanchette: I hadn't heard the second one.

DePue: Oh, you hadn't, huh?

Blanchette: No.

DePue: Yeah, Edgar Scissorhands.

Blanchette: Okay.

DePue: Let's move away from Lincoln to a certain extent and back toward the historic sites. In 1990, I believe, the Vachel Lindsay Home was acquired by the State.¹⁸ Any memories of that?

Blanchette: Yeah. That's a really hidden gem for the state of Illinois. Not a lot of people know about Vachel Lindsay, but yet a lot of people know his work and just don't realize it. They've heard verses of his poetry somewhere or heard phrases that he might have used. I just recall that it was a time of great discovery for the public about this poet, this author, this artist. It was kind of a rediscovery of Vachel Lindsay that went along with that.

It was a time where...probably not the best time in the world to be adding historic sites to our roster, because we're having to cut back a lot of different places, and here we're adding another historic site, in addition to Pullman. But that's a place that I wish more people could visit because it's a fascinating story, and the house is truly a historic gem.

DePue: It's right here in Springfield. I had an opportunity to interview Jenny Battle^s, who is as passionate about Vachel Lindsay as Tom Schwartz or others would be passionate about Abraham Lincoln.²¹ Lindsay is considered to be one of the three main prairie poets. You've got Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters and Vachel Lindsay.

Blanchette: Right.

DePue: As an English major, had you encountered his work already?

¹⁶ Edgar Scissorhands was presumably a reference to the 1990 movie *Edward Scissorhands* about a fictitious character named Edward who has scissor blades instead of hands.

¹⁸ The Vachel Lindsay Home, built in 1848, was the birthplace and lifelong home of poet Vachel Lindsay, in Springfield, Illinois, and is now a historic house museum. . (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vachel_Lindsay_House).

²¹ Jenny Battle's oral history interview is can be accessed at found [allinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/oralhistory/Organizations and Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/BattlesJennie.aspx](http://allinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/oralhistory/Organizations_and_Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/BattlesJennie.aspx).

Blanchette: Yes, I had. In fact, if you're a fan of the movie *Dead Poets Society*, you'll see Vachel Lindsay poetry performed as it was intended to be performed.²³ His poetry is intended to be performed, not just read. You'll see some of the students actually performing. I believe it's "The Congo" in one scene. He was a performer, and a lot of people don't realize that. He was very much like Shakespeare. The work isn't meant to be read; it's meant to be performed. And it makes more sense when it's performed.

DePue: Hopefully people will pay more attention and they hear the name again and will check it out.

Blanchette: I think they should.

DePue: I love his artwork, his paintings. They're amazing.

Blanchette: They really are. The *Wedding of the Rose and the Lotus* is a great work of art.²⁵ It seems to me like he, without really realizing it, was kind of tapping into kind of the modernist, impressionist vein in some way. I don't think he saw himself as copying other people, but I think he was, without trying to. You might look at some of the stuff, like Salvador Dali or people like that, would do. It kind of reminds me of some of that and some of the Impressionist painters.

DePue: January of 1990, I believe, the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency started to lease Union Station as a new headquarters.²⁷

Blanchette: Right. That's about when I moved my office over there, as well.

DePue: How did that piece of property get acquired? Do you remember any of the details?

Blanchette: They were forward thinking.

DePue: "They" being?

Blanchette: The people at Historic Preservation Agency, some of the trustees. Number one, it was about to fall into disrepair or be lost or something. It used to be a shopping area, and it was in danger of being lost.

DePue: I believe the Scully family owned it at the time.²⁸

²³ *Dead Poets Society* was a 1989 American film about an English teacher who inspires his students through his teaching of poetry. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead Poets Society](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Poets_Society)).

²⁵ *Wedding of the Rose and the Lotus* is a drawing by Lindsay, who wrote a poem of the same name. (<http://sangamoncountyhistory.org/wp/?p=6981>).

²⁷ Union Station is a former train station in Springfield, Illinois, built 1897-98, now part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Springfield Union Station \(Illinois\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Springfield_Union_Station_(Illinois)).)

²⁸ The Scullys were a prominent Springfield family that previously owned Union Station. (<https://illinoistimes.com/article-1745-back-to-the-future.html>.)

Blanchette: Right. So by acquiring it and fixing it up for offices, the Historic Preservation Agency was saving a historic building, also getting us out from underneath the Old State Capitol. My memory is kind of sketchy on everything that went along with the acquisition of Union Station, but I know that shortly after we got it we moved there, moved most of our offices there. And it was always part of the discussion for a presidential library museum as a possible something, something that could go along with the library-museum. It ended up being kind of a visitors center for the facility.

DePue: Was there some thought that it might actually be the location of the new library?

Blanchette: I don't know that it went that far. I'm trying to remember all the different parcels of land that were considered. I don't think that was one of them. I do know that it was a great place to watch construction of the library museum. You could just look out the window and see progress every day while that facility was being built.

DePue: And get excited, more excited every day, watching it being built, I would think.

Blanchette: Sure did.

DePue: September 7, 1990, the Dana-Thomas House reopens to the public, after it had been purchased by the State, something like nine years before that time.³⁰

Blanchette: That was Jim Thompson's baby. He helped the State get that. He helped secure the artifacts that weren't still there. That was his *cause célèbre*. The opening of the Dana-Thomas House, that was the first big proactive event I was involved with at the Historic Preservation Agency, where I had to do the publicity. I did a wonderful press kit for it, wrote a bunch of feature stories, took a bunch of photographs. We had great coverage of the opening ceremony.

They closed down Lawrence Avenue. But they also—something which I was told Jim Thompson did, which I was told was one of the most difficult things to do—he stopped the trains from running. The train tracks are right by the Dana-Thomas House. It's a very busy train track, and not once during the hour-long ceremony was there a single train horn or crossing or anything. I was told later on that that was directly... Jim Thompson went directly to the railroad and said, "We need the trains to stop running while this ceremony is going on" (both laugh).

Also, with this ceremony, it was the first obvious evidence that there was something going on between Jim Thompson and Mike Devine because at

³⁰ The Dana-Thomas House was designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright and built 1902–04 in Springfield, Illinois. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dana-Thomas_House. Wright was a prominent American architect, interior designer, writer, and educator (1867-1959). (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Lloyd_Wright.)

these type of ceremonies the agency director always is seated by the governor. Well, they didn't say a word to each other. Thompson didn't even look in his direction. This was probably a couple of weeks, maybe a month or two, after the incident where Mike Devine was supposed to do something with the general assembly and then didn't. It was painfully obvious that there was some animosity there. But we got some worldwide coverage for that house, and it deserved it.

DePue: What is it about the Dana-Thomas House that draws worldwide coverage?

Blanchette: It's the best preserved of Frank Lloyd Wright's early prairie style residences. Probably... Not probably, it is the most complete early prairie style residence in the world. Almost everything is original there. It's been restored—I don't know if restored is the right word—restored but then put back to its original intent, to about 1904. When you restore something, you don't refinish. Well, parts of this house were refinished, but they made it look like you're a visitor from 1904, walking in while it's still new and fresh. That's the experience that you get. It's the way Frank Lloyd Wright intended it, and that's what happens when you walk through here. You know that more than 90 percent of the furniture is original to the house. Almost all the art glass is original to the house. It's an incredible historical journey.

DePue: What most people, I think, probably don't understand about Frank Lloyd Wright, he didn't just build the homes; he designed all of the furnishings, as well.

Blanchette: He designed the furnishings; he designed the wall sconces, the fireplace andirons, everything.

DePue: Light fixtures.

Blanchette: He was the ultimate, obsessive-compulsive architect (laughs). Yeah, light fixtures, everything.

DePue: Which is kind of cool. Here you've got Abraham Lincoln, the preeminent president for the United States and a piece of Frank Lloyd Wright, who I think most people would consider is the most important of America's architects.

Blanchette: Funny story about... There are two funny stories about the Dana-Thomas House. One was, Jim Thompson, obviously that was his site. He felt very strongly about that. But there were plans for him to spend the night there. And him being a very tall governor [6' 6"], and the client for whom the house was designed [Susan Lawrence Dana] was a woman who wasn't tall. So the bed that existed in the Dana-Thomas House was way too short for Jim Thompson. They were making plans to move in a bigger bed into the Dana-Thomas House, so Jim Thompson could spend the night in there. It almost happened. I don't know what caused it not to happen, but plans changed, and it ended up not happening. But I just...

DePue: Would it have been sacrilege to bring a different bed in there?

Blanchette: No, no, that wasn't it. I think it was because the governor's plans changed or something. I don't think it was because we couldn't do it or that people were saying, "You can't do this." But I just remember being in on those discussions, that "Oh, we've got to move this bigger bed in" (laughs).

And another was during Jim Edgar's inauguration. Governors always have receptions at all places around the city. And the site manager of the Dana-Thomas House, Don Hallmark, was very, very protective of the site. If you want someone who's a bulldog for, "Let's not damage this place; let's keep it pristine," he was the one. And Jim Edgar, one of his reception sites was the Dana-Thomas House.

They wanted to serve, I believe, wine or something. The house regulations had said that only clear liquids could be served there. It's very strict about what you could and couldn't do. They wanted to bend those rules a little bit. He was arguing with Susan Mogerma, the director of the agency, about what could and couldn't be done there. (laughs) I remember being with her right... I was there, the three of us were standing there, and she looked at Don Hallmark, and she said, "He's our boss. If he wants to roast a pig in a damn fireplace, we're going to let him" (both laugh).

So Jim Edgar was allowed to... It may have been soda or something, but it was some sort of non-clear liquid that was in violation of the house rules, a little bending of the rules. But she made Don Hallmark realize we got to make this guy happy.

DePue: Maybe not happy enough, because early 1992 there was deep discussion on the problems of trying to balance the budget, at the time, when you had to go back and revisit the budget that had already been approved and say, "We had to cut some more," and the decision was made to close the Dana-Thomas House. Do you recall that?

Blanchette: Yes. The IHPA's budget, like many agency budgets, was going to be cut. We wanted to be able to show that even a small cut to a small agency makes a huge impact. They didn't say, "You have to cut these particular sites." They just said, "Here's how much money your budget will be reduced. You have to make this work." Well, the biggest part of the budget was historic sites division budget, so any cut it would have to bear the brunt of it. So the decision was made, "Let's do a few sites that we can probably get by closing and not raise a huge public furor. But let's do one or two that are really going to get the public's attention. That will make the legislators and everyone realize this ain't a good idea." The Dana-Thomas House was one of them.

DePue: That's a tactic as old as politics.

Blanchette: Somebody called somebody's bluff, and they cut the budget. Then we were stuck with having to close the Dana-Thomas House.

DePue: Who was making these decisions?

Blanchette: The administration of the Historic Preservation Agency, the department heads, and the director, in consultation with the board of trustees.

DePue: So, Susan Mogerman, Bob Coomer, and Julie Cellini would have been in the center of that decision-making process?

Blanchette: Right. I don't think the Edgar Administration said, "You have to close the Dana-Thomas House." But the Dana-Thomas House had a couple of things working against it. It was a very staff-intensive site because it's a house museum, and those take more staff and more expense to run. For instance, an outdoor site, you don't have to worry about the same things you do with a house museum. In terms of what it took to run it, it took more money to run it, per visitor, than some of the other sites. Plus we'd just opened it. So it was this poster child for budget cuts versus public accessibility. And it ended up being closed.

DePue: What was the public reaction to it?

Blanchette: Outrage, especially the architectural folks and the Frank Lloyd Wright folks and Springfield tourism people, just outrage. It was closed for a while, and then it reopened one or two days a week. So it gradually worked back to being open again. I mean, if we were looking for a way to get the public's attention, we got it.

DePue: Was part of the rationale in reopening it a discussion about having a fee for the public going through?

Blanchette: Yeah. They did a pilot program for admission fees. That seemed to be the ideal place to try out an admission fee, and I believe Cahokia Mounds was one. There was another place that we tried out admission fees. We kept good records, as far as attendance and what visitors were willing to pay and what they weren't. The Dana-Thomas House, of all the sites where the trial admission fee was tried, was the only one where it actually worked. So we were able to get the site back open with a trial admission fee. Not too many people griped about it because they were used to paying to go visit other Frank Lloyd Wright sites.

Now, some of the other sites, attendance just plummeted. People weren't willing to pay fees. All the fees were eliminated because the trial program sunsetted, and it hasn't been brought back.

DePue: What other sites do you recall that were closed during that time?

Blanchette: Some of the smaller courthouses were closed. I think one of the Galena sites was closed. I'd have to go back and check, but various places around the state were closed. Most of the rest of the sites had hours reduced.

DePue: I'm just curious, what would you consider some of the other historic site gems that the state has?

Blanchette: Oh, they're all gems.

DePue: Spoken like a true PIO, Dave.

Blanchette: I like Fort de Chartres.³³ I have some French heritage, and that's a French heritage site. Lincoln Log Cabin is a great living history site.³⁵ Lincoln's New Salem [is] probably one of the most beautiful areas of the state to visit during the fall or the winter.³⁷ The whole town of Galena. We have Grant's Home, Old Market House, Washburne House [that] are the three IHPA sites there.⁴¹ They had actually toyed with the idea of trying to develop a Ulysses S. Grant presidential library there, but that never gained enough traction. I know I'm leaving out... Oh, David Davis Mansion in Bloomington, that's a great site.⁴³ Black Hawk. [You can] learn a lot about Native American history there.⁴⁴ Cahokia Mounds World Heritage Site.⁴⁵ Old State Capitol, everybody likes that. Most of them are gems.

DePue: One that was acquired about the time you got here was the Pullman Factory, the Pullman site, which is as I understand, a sprawling facility.⁴⁷

Blanchette: Huge, unbelievably huge. That was another Governor Thompson acquisition. That was one we fought. The board of trustees and Susan Mogerman tried to convince Governor Thompson this is not a good idea. It's not in that great a shape. It's going to take millions upon millions to just get it to the place where people can visit it. Let's not do this. He wouldn't budge. He says, "You're getting it. Deal with it." Well, we got it, and a couple of years later an arsonist set it on fire, and caused it to be in even worse condition.

DePue: Set the hotel [on fire], the Hotel Florence?

³³ Fort de Chartres was a French fortification first built 1720 on the east bank of the Mississippi River near Prairie du Rocher, Illinois, now a state park and a national historic landmark. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_de_Chartres.)

³⁵ Lincoln Log Cabin is a state historic park located near Charleston, Illinois, with a replica of the log cabin built and occupied by Thomas Lincoln, father of President Abraham Lincoln. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_Log_Cabin_State_Historic_Site.)

³⁷ Lincoln's New Salem is a reconstructed village near Petersburg, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln lived from 1831 to 1837, now a state historic site. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln's_New_Salem.)

⁴¹ Grant's Home is the former home of Ulysses S. Grant, the Civil War general and later eighteenth U.S. president, in Galena, Illinois, now a state historic museum. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulysses_S._Grant_Home.) OldMarket House is a building constructed in 1845 by the City of Galena to serve as a city hall and farmer's market, now a state historic site. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Market_House_\(Galena,_Illinois\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Market_House_(Galena,_Illinois))). The Washburne House was constructed in 1844–45 for Elihu Washburne, a prominent Galena lawyer who served as secretary of state and minister to France under President Grant, now a state historic site. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elihu_Benjamin_Washburne_House.)

⁴³ Davis Mansion was constructed in 1870-72 for David Davis, Supreme Court justice and senator from Illinois, now a state museum. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Davis_Mansion.)

⁴⁴ The Black Hawk State Historic Site in Rock Island, Illinois, occupies much of the historic home of a band of Native Americans of the Sauk nation. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Hawk_State_Historic_Site.)

⁴⁵ Cahokia Mounds, a World Heritage Site, is a pre-Columbian Native American city near the current East St. Louis, Illinois, and now a state historic site. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cahokia>.)

⁴⁷ The Pullman site was first planned industrial community in the U.S. and associated factory where Pullman train sleeping cars were produced, in Chicago, Illinois, now a state historic site and national historic monument. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pullman_National_Monument.)

Blanchette: No, it was the administration building. And then the fire spread to one of the manufacturing buildings, a huge fire, one of the biggest fires in a long time, in the recent history of Chicago.

Funny story about that. I was walking my dog on an evening, and my cellphone rang. It was a reporter from the *Chicago Tribune*. It might have been a Sunday night, I don't know, but it was definitely in the evening, and I was not expecting a call from the press. It was a reporter from the *Chicago Tribune*, who said, "I'm standing across the street from the blazing Pullman Factory. Can I have a comment from you?" I said, "What!" (laughs). "Yes, Pullman's on fire." I said, "Describe this. This can't be Pullman. I would have known about this. Describe the ..." He described the Clock Tower Building, the administration building, to a T. I'm like, "Oh, my God. Give me your number; I'll call you back."

So I called Bob Coomer. Bob says, "Yeah, Dave. I just got off the phone. There is a big fire at Pullman. We're trying to put it out now. I'll get you more information." I found out about a fire at one of our historic sites from the press (laughs). That's one of those kind of calls you don't like to get when you're a PR guy, is the press knows more about something than you do.

DePue: Was the journalist kind to you in that respect?

Blanchette: Yeah, and I called him back. I gave him the fact that...some kind of generic comment about Pullman is a great historic treasure. We will do everything we can to try and save it, something along those lines. But then I had to call the Governor's Office and say, "We've got a problem," and tell them what was going on.

DePue: Who was your point of contact at the Governor's Office?

Blanchette: It varied, depending on what administration. With Jim Edgar it would have been Mike Lawrence or somebody that worked for Mike Lawrence. That was who was governor at that time. I don't think I called Mike Lawrence; it was somebody who worked for Mike, and I can't recall who it is right now.

DePue: Susan becomes director of IHPA, it looks like, on June 20, 1991. That possibly is from one of your press releases. You were kind enough to show me some of your press releases. Not too long after that, I've got July 23, that State of Illinois acquires the Zimmerman site.⁴⁸

Blanchette: Zimmerman site was along the Illinois River, across from Starved Rock State Park. It was the site of the first contact between French explorers and the Native Americans that populated Illinois. It's the site of a **huge** Native American village. Virtually every place that you would put a shovel in that area, for miles, you would find evidence of Native American civilization. It

⁴⁸ Zimmerman site is where explorers Marquette and Joliet made the earliest contact between Europeans in 1673, near current Utica, Illinois, and also known historic site. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaskaskia>).

was farmland; it was along the river. The riverbanks were eroding. As the riverbanks eroded, Native American artifacts and Native American remains would be exposed and in danger. So it was thought that...

Oh, and there were possibility that there was some development that wanted to occur there. The State of Illinois was convinced that by purchasing this property we could keep it from being developed and keep it from eroding further. So that's what they did. It was not a controversial acquisition. I think the negotiations took quite a bit of time. This was a big parcel of land. But I don't think we faced a lot of controversy with that one. People realized this probably needs to be done. To this day, I think it's pretty much just held in ownership by the state. I think they allow farming there or something, but it accomplished its purpose.

There were long-term plans to have a visitors center, an interpretive center, there that talked about the Native American civilization and about the contact period between the French and the Native Americans. Those never materialized. It's one of those things where it's a great idea, but there wasn't enough money to go around at that time.

DePue: Nor is there today.

Blanchette: Nor is there today.

DePue: I doubt that you had a lot of involvement with this, but I am curious, Dickson Mounds and the controversy about those exposed Indian bones there.⁵⁰ That's a Department of Natural Resources site.

Blanchette: Right. But we were involved in those discussions because you've got Dickson Mounds, where, as it was built, the Native American remains were on public display. Then you've got Cahokia Mounds, which is also promoting and interpreting a Native American settlement, but we did not put human remains on display there when that was developed. The controversy with Dickson Mounds was that Native Americans, the protection of human remains is sacred to them, and putting them on display goes against everything they stand for.

This was my first introduction to a gentleman on Jim Edgar's staff, named Al Grosboll, who became Jim Edgar's point person for Native American issues. Long story short, [he] ended up revising the Dickson

⁵⁰ Dickson Mounds site, skeletons of Native Americans that had been excavated were displayed to the public from the 1930s until 1992, when in a controversial move, the burial display was resealed due to Native American concerns. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dickson_Mounds#:~:text=Their%20skeletons%20were%20excavated%20and,du e%20to%20Native%20American%20concerns.&text=The%20earlier%20burials%20were%20in,later%20burial s%20were%20in%20cemeteries.)

Mounds Museum to cover up the human remains, so they were no longer on public display.

DePue: I'm glad I asked you about that.

Blanchette: In fact, I still talk with Al whenever I see him, to this day. Our paths would cross a number of different times because he then became involved with the presidential library project a little bit later on and became kind of our point of contact with the Edgar Administration there, too.

DePue: I know he was involved with the Vachel Lindsay Home, as well.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: In December of 1992, and for several months, the Old State Capitol was closed for floor replacement. Does that ring a bell at all?

Blanchette: Yeah, the wood, because of fluctuating temperature and humidity... You have 100,000 people going through that place every year, and the doors are large, so when they swing open, it lets in a lot of the air, whether cold or hot or humid or not humid. The floors weren't designed to take that kind of abuse (laughs), and they had buckled. It was creating an ugly situation but also a potentially damaging one. What if somebody tripped over the buckled floor and hurt themselves?

The best way to do a project is just close a place down; do it right; reopen it when it's done. That's what they did. Also, they put in a new subfloor to help correct the buckling problem that was happening up to that point. It's worked pretty well. It hasn't happened again.

DePue: Apparently in the same timeframe—and this makes perfect sense to me—there was a decision to move all of the library's books over to the Howlett Building [at 501 S. 2nd Street] for a temporary time, so they could do some climate control things in the state historical library, which is underneath the Old State Capitol.

Blanchette: Right. The stacks, as it was called, were badly in need of some new climate control systems, to prevent the same type of problem from happening to them that happened to the floors at the Old State Capitol, so you wouldn't have those fluctuations in temperature and humidity, and the artifacts would be in a much more stable environment. Again, the best way to work on something is to just move everything out; get the work done; move it back in. That's what they did.

DePue: But that's illustrative of the essential problems you have when you decide to have a historical library, and Lincoln artifacts by the way, stuck underneath another building, next to a parking ramp, is it not?

Blanchette: It is. But by that time we were well underway with thinking and planning about a presidential library/museum. We knew that, even if the majority of the collections underneath the Old State Capitol were to move to the new

presidential library, that the historic sites, each had their own collections, whether they were housed in Springfield or at the site itself, which were in desperate need of some climate controlled storage. Even if the stacks weren't to be used for the historical library, we knew we could fill them with historic material from somewhere in the agency. That was a project that everyone agreed needed to be done.

DePue: I have some curiosity questions for you. How much money had been committed to building a new historic library at the time?

Blanchette: Off the top of my head I don't recall.

DePue: I would guess that nothing had been committed. I know it wasn't until the '98 timeframe, at the very end of the Edgar Administration, that that first seed money came across.

Blanchette: That may be correct. Again, my memory's kind of fuzzy on that. I know that there were some serious discussions about what it might cost and what kind of cap might be put on that.

DePue: You just talked about the agency acquiring the Union Station. Was that considered as a possible location for the historical library?

Blanchette: I don't believe it was.

DePue: Do you know why?

Blanchette: I think less than ideal conditions possibly. The building, as designed, was a passenger rail station, with lots of open space, lots of windows. When you're talking about a historical library, you don't want a lot of open space. You want a space that's a little bit more closed-in and climate controlled. That may have been one. But honestly I don't know. I just don't think it was ever seriously considered as a space for the new library.

DePue: Currently the IHPA offices are in what we call the JR Building, the old Journal Register Building.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: Was that part of IHPA at the time?

Blanchette: No, that was acquired during the '90s. It was done in memory of Frank Mason, who used to be one of the IHPA trustees. In fact, there's a plaque in his honor there. Again, it's acquiring an historic building, restoring it, and then using it for a modern purpose. It's the poster child for adaptive reuse, which is what we're all about at the Historic Preservation Agency, the Preservation Services Division. It just seemed like a good fit for the Historic Preservation Agency.

DePue: But not for the historical library?

Blanchette: No. No, that was never considered for the historical library.

DePue: Again, do you know why it wasn't considered?

Blanchette: I don't. It was always envisioned as offices for the IHPA.

DePue: In August of '93—I think this will bring back some memories for you—IHPA trustees, Julie Cellini, Frank Mason, some others, decide to no longer pay the salary for the [Illinois State] Historical Society executive director.

Blanchette: There was a falling out between the agency and the State Historical Society.

DePue: What was the relationship before that time?

Blanchette: Before then it was very close. The Historical Society, the agency provided office space for them, a lot of logistical support for the Historical Society.

DePue: What was the purpose of the Historical Society?

Blanchette: Historical Society is a private, not-for-profit group to promote the interpretation and study of Illinois history. The missions are very similar, and they had a very good relationship for a long time. But then there were people on the boards of the society and the agency who had a falling out. It was a very serious falling out, to the point that there was name calling and accusations hurled back and forth.

What it boiled down to was that several people on each side couldn't stand each other, and this led to a boiling over of, "Well, does the state really need to be in the business of supporting a not-for-profit anyway? This could be an audit finding." So it began as kind of a spat, a personality spat, but also had some very practical considerations, like, "If we keep this up, will it be an audit finding?" Yes, it probably would have. And so the agency and the society had a split, and the society had to go find their own offices, and they didn't get agency support anymore. For a long time, and probably still to this day, they held separate symposiums, separate events, which are duplicative, yes.

DePue: They each have their own journal.

Blanchette: Yeah, each have their own journal. When I left the agency, there was some reaching across the aisle, handshake type things, that were occurring to try and patch some of that up. But to this day the society remains independent of the agency, and it's probably going to remain that way.

DePue: During that time in 1993, do you recall there was some damage control that you, as the public information officer, had to do?

Blanchette: About the society and the agency?

DePue: About the split.

Blanchette: Not so much. And I'm telling you the backstory there about how it happened. But publicly, we just said it was we want to avoid an audit finding, that it's probably not a good idea to have a state agency supporting a not-for-profit.

We wish them well, all that kind of stuff, knowing that behind the scenes, it was really a personality conflict.

DePue: Also 1993 was the summer of the great flood, the Great Flood of '93.⁵²

Blanchette: Oh, do I remember that (laughs).

DePue: Some of the historic sites were casualties of that?

Blanchette: Yeah. The worst one was Fort de Chartres, which is right on the Mississippi River. If you recall the news coverage of that, you undoubtedly remember the town of Prairie du Rocher, [Illinois], which was the focal point of... Here's citizens trying to save their little town from the Mississippi River. There were sandbags, and you had aerial shots of this. Well, Fort de Chartres is just down the road from Prairie du Rocher. As part of the effort to eliminate pressure on the levees, there was dynamiting that was occurring on the levees.

Well, either the levee was breached, or it was dynamited—I don't recall which—near Fort de Chartres. The result was the flood waters came in. Now, the walls of Fort de Chartres are very high. I remember going down with the idea... I went down with some Sites Division people and Preservation Services Division people to kind of survey what damage had been done to historic resources, including Fort de Chartres.

We got down there, and the Coast Guard was there, with boats on what used to be farmland. They said, "We can take two of you out on this boat, so you can survey up close and personal what the situation is like." I was selected to be one, and then Anne Hacker from Preservation Services Division was selected to be the other. I remember as we boarded the boat, we had to walk... You couldn't walk around them; you had to walk on them. Thousands and thousands of little black frogs were everywhere. Where they came from... But you couldn't walk anywhere without stepping on frogs, little black frogs. So we climb in the Coast Guard boat. The water is so high that we were having to duck our heads as the boat goes under power lines. That's how high the water was. And there was corn stalks hanging from the electrical wires. And we got near Fort de Chartres and the levee break was a few hundred yards away and the water current was still so strong that the boat was starting to be sucked into the main channel of the Mississippi River. And they had to give it all the gas they could to keep the boat from being sucked into the main channel.

We finally avoided that, but then we got to Fort de Chartres, and we were actually able to look over the top of the walls from our position in the boat. That's how high the water was. It was just incredible, the amount of water. It looked like a fast moving lake. You could see the bluffs on the

⁵²The Great Flood was in 1993 along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and their tributaries. in (1ttsipedia.org/wiki/Great Flood of 1993.)

Illinois side, a mile or so away, and all you could see on the Missouri side was just water, just water. I saw a barn, an entire barn, float by.

DePue: How much damage was caused to Fort de Chartres?

Blanchette: Quite a lot. The levee break caused land around the fort to scour away, so there was just this yawning chasm once the water went down. The water entered all the buildings, so all the buildings had flood damage. The walls had some damage that had to be repaired. The devastation was just incredible.

Also, we went to Pierre Menard Home, down the road a little ways, near Chester.⁵³ And the water... See, the Pierre Menard Home's kind of up on the bluff a little bit. The water there reached the lower level. It's a French colonial structure, so you've got like a lower level, then the stairway that goes to the main level. The water had entered the lower level but not the main level yet. The thing that struck me most about that was, we're standing on the front porch of the Pierre Menard Home, and the only thing you could hear was the roar of the river. I've never been to Niagara Falls, but that's kind of what I thought Niagara Falls would sound like, just the roar of this... It just boggles the mind, having seen that up close.

That same day, I think Susan Mogerman went up in the helicopter with Governor Edgar to survey the damage. They flew over Fort de Chartres, and we've got aerial pictures of the water surrounding Fort de Chartres. I believe that happened on the same day.

DePue: How about Cohokia Mounds? Was that not under threat?

Blanchette: Not so much, and I'm not sure why. I think just... I'm not sure.

DePue: I thought it was fairly close to the river.

Blanchette: It is, but I don't recall it being that severely impacted.

DePue: And as I recall—this is fuzzy—but I think the corps of engineers blew a couple holes in the levee downstream to release some of that pressure.

Blanchette: I think you're correct.

DePue: And then later on, September, the governor was able to get some grant money. Of course, he got the federal money, as well, for that. Do you recall anything, any specifics in that respect?

Blanchette: I know that we administered some flood recovery grants for historic properties that were privately owned. There was some assistance that helped us with our historic sites. The thing I remember most about that was, a short time after the

⁵³ The Pierre Menard House, located in Ellis Grove, Illinois, was the home of Pierre Menard, the first lieutenant governor of Illinois, and is now a state historic site and a National Historic Landmark. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Menard_House.)

flood, when all the recovery efforts started to happen, FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency, an agency of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security]—remember the famous FEMA trailers that would replace people's homes...? We were at an event with Governor Edgar. We just happened to be there. It wasn't our site or anything, but for some reason I happened to be there. The event was to turn over ownership of one of these new FEMA trailers to people whose homes had been swept away by the floodwaters. Governor Edgar was very particular about every little thing, and he made sure that his staff knew that you don't want to tick off the boss. You make sure everything's in place; make sure everything works okay; do your advance work. "You're professionals. I'm the chief executive of Illinois. Do your advance work."

So we're there at this FEMA trailer, and the event had him turning over the keys to the new owners. They undo the lock, walk in the trailer, and then the press follows them in. The event's over; he turns the key over to the owners; the key doesn't work (both laugh).

I don't know why the key didn't work, but nobody got to go inside the trailer at the event. I heard from his staff later on that he was not a happy camper after that.

DePue: And he had the ability to let people know when he wasn't happy about something.

Blanchette: Yeah. There were events that we actually had with him, later on, that pertained to the presidential library museum. I remember one vividly where he showed up. Anytime a governor shows up, you'll see his advance people. They'll greet him, and then they'll kind of give him a quick briefing. Here's who's here; here's where the stage is, that kind of thing. That gives the governor also the chance to kind of look at the dais or whatever. I remember him showing up and looking in, he says, "I don't like the way that's set up. Change it." So everybody waited while they changed things to suit the governor. He was very particular.

DePue: He was image conscious.

Blanchette: Yeah. Oh, yeah, very smart. He knows what his image is, and he knows how to maintain it.

DePue: Let's jump to 1995 in the spring, and the library and society—this kind of goes back to what we were talking about before—each received \$1.3 million from the estate of King V. Hostick. I think that might have been part of the initial friction between the two institutions, in terms of how the King V. Hostick estate money was going to be distributed.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ King V. Hostick was a Springfield collector of rare and historic documents who died in 1993. (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1993-04-14-9304140201-story.html>).

Blanchette: Yeah. I wasn't involved in the behind-the-scenes on that so much. I was just involved in the publicity of it. But I remember it coming, and we had to decide how that money would be used. I believe you're correct, that each entity had its own ideas about how it should be used. It certainly didn't help relations between the two.

DePue: I'm thinking I've lost one thing here that I definitely wanted to talk to you about—I don't know when on the timeline that would have occurred—your opportunity to do some scuba diving, tell us about that.

Blanchette: That was for the *Lady Elgin* shipwreck case.⁵⁷ The State of Illinois and a salvage operator, Harry Zych—I remember that name vividly. The *Lady Elgin* was a paddlewheel steamer that sank on Lake Michigan in 1864, and there's a whole lot of history in that shipwreck alone and how it influenced the presidential campaign and everything. But the bottom line is the ship sank within sight of the city of Chicago. And for more than a century, the location of the wreck was unknown. I mean, it was known to the people at the time, but once the memory was gone, nobody knew where it was.

Well, Harry Zych, who's a salvage operator, found the *Lady Elgin*. He immediately wanted to claim ownership. The State of Illinois stepped in—it was a historic shipwreck—and they claimed, because it was embedded in Illinois territorial waters, that the wreck belonged to Illinois. That launched a multiple year fight over the ownership of the *Lady Elgin* shipwreck. It went to the court, to the appeals court, to the supreme court, multiple levels, and it seems like...

DePue: To the state supreme court?

Blanchette: Yeah, and multiple levels. The opinions went one way, then the other way, then the other way. Ended up, in the end, Harry Zych got ownership. But before then, in the middle of all the litigation, the State of Illinois... All parties agreed that the State of Illinois could hire an underwater archeologist to go document the wreck as it existed, so that at least we had a benchmark for everything. As part of that, since this was an independent contractor, not a state employee, they thought it was probably a good idea if a state employee was able to verify the condition of the wreck. Well, as being the only certified scuba diver at Historic Preservation, I was selected. So I was able to take a dive on the *Lady Elgin* shipwreck.

When you're on the boat getting ready to dive, you can hear the traffic on Lake Shore Drive; it's that close. But once you go underwater... It's under about sixty-feet of water, and the first twenty or thirty or feet or so, you can't see your hand in front of your face, the water is that green. Then you reach a level where the water gets a lot colder and a lot clearer. That's when... The

⁵⁷ The *Lady Elgin* was a wooden-hulled sidewheel steamship that sank in Lake Michigan after being rammed in a gale by a schooner in 1860. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PS_Lady_Elgin).

first thing you see when you get below that thermal level is this giant anchor, just sitting on the bottom of Lake Michigan. That's the anchor from the *Lady Elgin*. Pieces of the boiler are laying there, and then there's little artifacts strewn about. That was just a fascinating thing to be able to do.

While we were out there, we went and took a look at the *Seabird*, which was another shipwreck, which was several miles away, which was subject to a lawsuit as well.⁶⁰ So as part of my duties as a public information officer I got to scuba dive on historic shipwrecks within sight of the city of Chicago.

DePue: Well, I'm afraid that I have the affliction of watching the *Titanic* and thinking about people swimming inside the shipwreck.⁶³ But it doesn't sound like that would be the case for this.

Blanchette: No, these were in pieces on the bottom of the lake. The only thing you could really swim through would be swim under the anchor. Everything else was embedded in the floor.

DePue: Zych gets ownership, but how do you make money on something that's underwater?

Blanchette: He salvaged what he could. I don't know what he did with the artifacts, but here were muskets; there were personal items. I'm not in that business; I don't know. But it must have been pretty lucrative because he pursued the case for quite some time.

DePue: Getting into 1997, February, the Lincoln Tomb is repaired with a new, authentic palladium ceiling.⁶⁵ You recall that?

Blanchette: Yes. Lincoln Tomb, as it was designed and built in the 1870s, was... It was not a model of weather tightness, a flat roof on the deck of the tomb. It was designed to let people walk on top of the deck to see the Civil War statues around the top. Because of that it was flat. Well, everyone knows, a flat roof in the Midwest, if you don't have adequate drainage, is going to leak. Well, it leaked, almost from the time it was built.

It was a very fine edifice when built, and still is. But because it was a fine edifice, they put all of these very expensive, decorative touches, including gold leaf ceiling in the burial chamber, lots of gold leaf throughout, but also palladium leaf in the entryway to Lincoln Tomb. Now, palladium is much more precious than gold, and palladium leaf is even more precious than gold

⁶⁰ The *Seabird* was a sidewheel passenger steamship that burned and then sank in Lake Michigan in 1868. (<http://lakeeffectliving.com/Apr12/Shipwrecks-Seabird.html>)

⁶³ *Titanic* is a 1997 movie that portrayed the sinking of the RMS *Titanic* during its maiden voyage, ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Titanic_\(1997_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Titanic_(1997_film)))

⁶⁵ Lincoln Tomb, is final resting place of Abraham Lincoln and his wife and three of their sons, is located in Oak Ridge Cemetery, Springfield, Illinois. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_Tomb).

leaf. Unfortunately, the water intrusion showed itself most in the entrance area, where the palladium leaf was. You could see the plaster showing through, and the palladium leaf had been flaking.

And when the State of Illinois decided, "Enough is enough. Let's fix these leaks; let's put this thing back to the way it needs to be," they had to hire a specialty firm. [They] took bids, of course, but then ended up hiring a specialty firm to reinstall the palladium leaf. That was a national news story. It was such an unusual... Most people had never heard of palladium, unless it's the name of a concert venue or something (both laugh). But they didn't realize this is a precious metal that you can coat the inside of things with.

So that was a national news story, and we had a lot of camera crews and photographers came and document these people on scaffolds, just very carefully applying this stuff that is so thin. You can't even imagine how thin this stuff is. It's more precious than gold and had to be carefully... The supplies of it had to be carefully guarded while the workers were there.

DePue: That sounds like the kind of project for which the state legislature would have had to specify funds.

Blanchette: Yeah. The state legislature, whenever you have a capital construction plan, they agree to an amount—say it's \$1 billion dollars—and they have to agree, this is how we're financing it. Usually you sell bonds, and the proceeds from those bond sales then finance the construction projects. Usually, included in that capital construction bill authorization, is a general list of projects like, this is how much goes to roads, and here are some specific roads we want to fix. This is how much is going to historic preservation. Here's some of the things we want to fix at historic preservation. Well, everybody had a soft spot for the Lincoln's Tomb, and so bringing Lincoln's Tomb to the way it needed to be was part of one of those capital construction bills.

DePue: Even to the point where we're willing to spend money on palladium.

Blanchette: I don't think it got into that level of detail when it passed the general assembly. I think they just knew that we wanted to fix it up to the way it was in Lincoln's time and whatever it took. As I recall, overall the project wasn't that expensive, but one of the most expensive parts of it was the palladium ceiling.

DePue: This is 1997. We talked in 1991-92, the budget problems that Edgar had as the new governor. He's still governor in '97, but the economic climate of the United States is much different by that time. Looking for Lincoln was

something that I believe started about 1998.⁶⁷ Did you have much involvement with that? Can you explain what that project was about?

Blanchette: That's an effort that is separate from the Historic Preservation Agency, but we work very closely with them. That's an effort to link every possible Lincoln heritage site or activity in Illinois together so that you can encourage people to visit communities that have some sort of Lincoln connection or have some sort of Lincoln event. They put out maps and brochures and arrange tours. We worked, and as I understand, continue to work very closely with them to get people into communities that have any sort of Lincoln connection whatsoever. And they're constantly adding new communities. Maybe Lincoln slept here, or maybe Lincoln tried a case here, or maybe they have Lincoln days here. It's very much an economic engine, especially for Central Illinois communities.

DePue: That's what you're saying. Do you have proof that it has benefited these communities with increased tourism?

Blanchette: Just what the communities say, the fact that more people are coming and they're visiting these places, calling, expressing interest.

DePue: I want to finish with this one today. We have just been talking a little bit about money. On February 12 of 1998, in his last year as governor, Jim Edgar gave his 1999 budget address, which would be for a new governor when we reached 1999. It included \$4.9 million to begin planning for an Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum and Library and the promise that eventually this would be \$40 million that the State would be willing to commit to farther down the road. I wonder if you can tell me more about that.

Blanchette: Yes. The governor wanted something tangible as part of his legacy for the presidential library and museum. By that time this core group of planners for the presidential library and museum, which was key people from the board of trustees, key people from the agency, scholars and historians and researchers. This core group had been meeting and discussing and talking about what we might want. So we kind of had a good idea of the direction that we wanted to go. So it was time to put rubber to the road. Best way to do that, the logical next step, is to develop plans, specific plans.

Governor Edgar was able to introduce in his budget, the funding to hire an architect, an exhibit designer. By that time also, the decision had been made that we needed two different planning things, one to plan the exhibits, one to plan the buildings. The \$4 million and change was to be split for that particular planning purpose.

DePue: That sounds like it had already been decided that it wouldn't be just a new repository for the Lincoln collection, but a museum as well.

⁶⁷ "Looking for Lincoln," the Abraham Lincoln National Heritage Area, is a compilation of Lincoln sites, designated as a national heritage area in partnership with the National Park Service. (<https://www.lookingforlincoln.com/>).

Blanchette: Yeah. I'm pretty sure at that point they were still thinking of one building, with a big exhibit component. When this group, this core group of planners, visited all the existing presidential libraries, almost every one of them said, "You've really got to put some thought into developing your exhibits because that gives Joe Public a reason to stop in.

Scholars will always find you; researchers will always find you. But if you want foot traffic from the general public, you've got to give them something to see. Your exhibits have to be very important." We were by then thinking very much along the lines of, this has to be a really good exhibit component included in this facility.

DePue: That's as far as I wanted to go today. So the next session will be very much about those next few years and the roller coaster ride that you guys were all on as you were developing the concept and seeing that all the way through to fruition to the new Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. I know this much in talking to Julie and Susan and others; that wasn't the name that was being tagged to this project at the time it first got that seed money in 1998. Do you recall what the name was at that time?

Blanchette: I don't, but I recall vividly the meeting I had (laughs). I wish I could remember what the name was that was being bandied about. Whatever it was, Governor Edgar did not like it. Because I was writing the news release to announce the seed money for the planning... I was working with the Governor's Office on that news release. Eric Robinson, who was the governor's press secretary at the time, Al Grosboll, me and... were summoned to Governor Edgar's office in the executive mansion to talk about this because he wanted to decide once and for all what we're going to call it, and we'll call it that in perpetuity.

We got in that office. For one thing, I'm a little nervous. I'd never been called in specifically, me by name, to a meeting with the governor. It's always been as the tagalong to Susan Mogerma or somebody. The fact that I'm there by myself, with two people from the Governor's Office, had me a little worried. We got in there, and the governor was very adamant. He did not like whatever name we were thinking of. He said, "It's going to be the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum." Al Grosboll said, "Governor, that's too long. Nobody's going to like that name."

For a few minutes, Eric Robinson and I are watching Al Grosboll and Governor Edgar, and Al won't let up. Governor Edgar's getting more and more angry, and Eric's whispering, "Al, shut up. Al, shut up" (laughs). Finally the governor said, "Look, I'm the governor. This is what we're going to call it. This is what it's going to be in the news release. That's the end of the story" (both laugh). That's why it ended up being the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

But I remember leaving there, just covered in sweat because I was like, "I'm a political hire. I can be fired in a moment's notice if I screw up this news

release” (laughs). I told you, Al Grosboll's and my path would cross frequently throughout the years. He had no problem arguing back and forth with the governor. I certainly would not have done that. I didn't feel comfortable doing that and certainly didn't feel comfortable doing that with anybody but Pat Quinn, who I worked for much later in my career.

DePue: I have interviewed Al Grosboll, as part of the Jim Edgar Oral History collection.⁶⁹ He had a great story about very early in their relationship, where you get a sense that Edgar valued somebody who wasn't just going to be a yes man, who was going to be there to help contribute and sometimes argue even.

Blanchette: He sure argued. I saw that also during the Dickson Mounds controversy. But this one was the only one where I was in a small group of people, where I was right on the firing line (laughs).

DePue: I think that's probably a great place for us to finish off today, with the promise of having a fascinating discussion next time we get together, Dave. Thank you very much.

Blanchette: Looking forward to it.

(end of transcript #1)

⁶⁹ Al Brosboll's comments are accessible at <https://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/oralhistory/illinoisstatecraft/edgar/Pages/GrosbollAllen.aspx>.

Interview with David Blanchette

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Interview # 2: July 6, 2015

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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A Note to the Reader

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DePue: Today is Monday, July 6, 2015. This is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and I'm with David Blanchette, Dave to all of your friends, I'm sure. We're sitting in former State Historian, Tom Schwartz's, old office, because we haven't filled that position since Tom left in 2011. We'll get to that story eventually, I suspect. Today, Dave, what I wanted to talk to you about was essentially the planning stages, the construction stage, and the opening of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. That's not a small subject. I think we'll be able to get through it today, but we'll see how quickly it all goes.

Blanchette: Hopefully this goes more quickly than the process itself (both laugh).

DePue: Because that went on for how long?

Blanchette: A long time, 1990 through 2005? Is that right? Yeah, fifteen years, yeah.

DePue: Two thousand five was the opening of the museum and 2004 for the library.

Blanchette: The library should have been 2002, but I think we'll cover that.

DePue: We left off last time with a discussion about the seed money that Governor Edgar got for the library in 1998, that last year that he was in office. It was

really for, I suspect, the 1999 budget, if I get that correct, \$4.9 million. What I wanted to start with then is the discussion of you as the press representative for IHPA. You have to announce all these things. How did you deal with the price of the library and museum going up over time?

Blanchette: Well, initially it was easy because this was a nebulous something that no one was quite sure what form it was going to take. So the first few times where we modified the price upward, we were able to say, "We're getting more specific. We know a little bit more about what it's going to cost. We want to do it right," and that sort of thing. It was further on in the process where it ended up costing, all told, library, museum, Union Square Park, Union Station, new parking ramp... When it was \$165 million, then we would justify it by saying, "Compared to the William Jefferson Clinton Presidential Library, which cost the same amount of money, we've got quite a bargain," trying to deflect it that way.

That was a pretty sore subject throughout the whole process, number one because we started it during the Edgar years, when everyone else was being cut, and all of a sudden here we are getting money for something we've never had before.

DePue: But if you look at 1998—sorry to interrupt here—those are very good economic years.

Blanchette: They are, but you're still talking the Edgar administration, where people were still smarting from having programs cut, and suddenly we become the golden child, and we're getting money. So, yes, it was always a subject, and whenever I would go to speak to community groups about it, that would be either question number one or question number two, "Why are we spending so much money on this?" And "What are we going to get in return?"

It's easy to talk about economic benefit because a lot of times people don't corner you and say, "Well, what are your specifics? Where are you getting your numbers?" That's something that the tourist industry likes to do, is the economic benefit of travel and tourism. But sometimes it's a little bit difficult to quantify—especially for something you've never had—because you don't know how many people are going to come visit. So any number you put out in advance of something opening is fiction. It's all based on estimates. And here we have something we've never had before. It's a brand new beast for the city of Springfield.

We actually weren't sure how many people were going to come and visit. The one that came closest to estimating what our crowd load was going to be was the minute amount of input that we got from the Disney Corporation, who said, "You need to build this many parking spaces. You need to have this square footage to accommodate these visitors. And here's what you can expect your first year, your second year, your third year, and then your plateau years." They were as close as anyone to figuring out what our crowd load was going to be.

DePue: The first year is the highest and then a decrease until you get to the plateau area?

Blanchette: Correct. Actually, first year-and-a-half. You do things either by fiscal year or calendar year with the State of Illinois. Here we opened right smack in the middle of both. So, actually, the first year-and-a-half we had very, very large numbers of people coming through, like, an average of about 600,000 a year, if you did it over a calendar year span. Then it got to 400,000 plus, and now I think it's in the 200, 200 to 250, 300 [thousand] range, which is about where they said we were going to be.

DePue: It started with that \$4.9 million, and then I know that the Edgar administration says, "This is just the seed money to start the planning," that it would be in the neighborhood of \$60 million. By April of '99 it was \$115 million.

Blanchette: That's because by then we had figured out it's going to take two buildings, library and museum, taking to heart the advice we got from visiting every presidential library and museum and a number of history museums in the country about featuring the exhibit component very prominently.

We decided, hey, this is Lincoln; (laughs) boy do we have exhibits that we could feature for Lincoln. And boy do we have artifacts that we can display. So, rather than just build a library with an area for exhibits, let's have a whole building with exhibits, and then keep the library as a library. That was actually the biggest jump, was the \$60 million to \$115 million. That was why it did that is because the decision was made, let's make two separate buildings.

DePue: And by that time there's a vision. We'll talk about the development of that. Here's kind of a general question at the beginning of our interview today. Abraham Lincoln, would you consider him the most important figure in American history?

Blanchette: Probably Lincoln and Washington would be the two, and I think polls have shown that that is the case. There is no doubt that Lincoln is the most recognized American on the face of the earth. His impact on U.S. history, definitely one of the top two.

DePue: So why did it take so long to actually develop a library and museum dedicated to him?

Blanchette: Well, the library, presidential library, is a relatively new concept. It came into being during FDR's [Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 32nd U.S. president] administration, where he grandfathered Herbert Hoover [31st U.S. president] in and then everyone on forward.⁷⁰ So the presidential library animal is a twentieth century invention. And Lincoln lived, died, and began to be

⁷⁰ The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum is one of thirteen presidential libraries run by the National Archives and Records Administration. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Hoover_Presidential_Library_and_Museum)

remembered in the nineteenth century. Because there were so many iconic places that were connected with Lincoln—New Salem, Lincoln-Herndon Law Offices, the courthouses, the Old State Capitol, the Lincoln Home, the tomb—all these things that existed and were interpreted as pieces and parts of Lincoln's life, everybody thought, That's probably all we need. We get a million visitors to Springfield and the vicinity every year that come to see mainly Lincoln. Nobody really ever gave it any thought.

But really the idea sprang from not that, not the tourist portion, but the research portion. We've got all these Lincoln artifacts, all these Lincoln papers that few people, other than scholars and researchers, get to see. That's where the idea came forth was that we need a facility to better present this to the general public and let them know the treasures behind the tourist attractions. So we kind of stumbled into it really, thinking let's build a better library. Then that morphed into, let's build a better world-class tourist attraction.

DePue: As the press guy, how much did you personally know about Abraham Lincoln when you got started on this?

Blanchette: Probably as much as anybody, because when I joined the agency, it was just a very short period after that when we started talking about a presidential library. I had to learn from the experts. Luckily, we had some of the world's best experts on our staff, namely Tom Schwartz and the people that ran our historic sites. I leaned extremely heavily on them, as I did throughout this entire process, first Tom Schwartz and later James Cornelius, Kim Bauer also. I was in daily contact with those folks because, if there's one thing you learn about putting information about Lincoln in the public eye, is you damn well better get it right (laughs), because if you don't, there will be howls of protest from Lincoln experts, both professional and amateur.

There were times where I would get a word wrong or a date slightly off or put something in that was questionable, and boy, we heard about it (laughs). So I went out of my way to make sure that one or more of our Lincoln experts would look at just about everything I wrote and everything that I was going to present to the public, make sure it was correct. I'd say we succeeded 95 percent of the time, which in the PR business is extremely good.

DePue: This is a little bit ahead of the story, but it sounds like you went out and made lots of public appearances about the planning and the construction of the library and museum.

Blanchette: Yeah. There were a handful of us. Tom Schwartz was one; I was one, Julie Cellini, some of the others, Katherine Harris. People in Kiwanis clubs, Rotary clubs, women's groups, church groups, they're always looking for speakers, and this was the hot topic. So it was decided that just a handful of us would be the ones that would go out and do these requests. Early on, all we had were drawings from the exhibit designers or the architects that we would get up and

do our talk and then on an easel we'd have a drawing. We'd say, "Here's what it's going to look like. Here's what this exhibit's going to look like."

When the decision on the location of the library and museum was made, we could show a map of Springfield, "Here's where it's going to be located." It was difficult early on because you could just kind of see the blank look in their eyes, like, "Okay, we kind of know what this is, but we're not really sure what this is." (laughs) It wasn't until you started seeing bricks and mortar on the library building that people started to pay a little bit more attention, because the State of Illinois has a history of talking about big things and then not delivering all the time. So I think you had a lot of that feeling within Central Illinois in particular. Like, "Yeah, this is big talk, but until I see something, I'm not going to be convinced." Once we started seeing construction equipment at the corner of Sixth and... What is this, Washington, Sixth and Washington?

DePue: This is Jefferson right here.

Blanchette: Jefferson, Sixth and Jefferson. Once we started seeing construction equipment, that's when people started to take a little bit more notice.

DePue: Let's go back to the very beginning, before there were even designs of the building. You remember the selection of the architect?

Blanchette: I do. As I recall, one of the last news conferences that Jim Edgar had was to announce the selection of the architect and the exhibit designer, if I'm not mistaken.

DePue: Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum.⁷¹

Blanchette: HOK, HOK. The oldest surviving partner was Gyo Obata. And then the exhibit design firm was BRC Imagination Arts.⁷² An interesting thing about that selection process, I was not involved in that. I was involved in publicizing whom we had selected.

The selection process was interesting, in that in addition to submitting whatever documents and materials the State of Illinois needed for competitive bidding, those who were involved in the project for both architect and exhibit designer were required to come and make a presentation before this group of scholars and historians and historic site managers and master teachers and IHPA representatives, who were the core group for planning. They were required to come before this group and just talk about what they felt about

⁷¹ Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum is a worldwide design, architecture, engineering, and urban planning firm established in St. Louis, Missouri. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HOK_\(firm\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HOK_(firm)))

⁷² BRC Imagination Arts is a design agency founded by Bob Rogers, who in 2009 received the "Order of Lincoln Medal" in recognition of his and BRC's work creating the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Rogers_\(designer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Rogers_(designer)))

Abraham Lincoln, what they could bring to the table, what their design philosophy was, what their strengths and weaknesses were.

To their credit, this core committee that requested this, they wanted to be comfortable with who the State of Illinois selected to do this work because they were very concerned about what we were going to do to Lincoln and his legacy. So they required all these firms to come and make presentations.

As it turned out, they were very impressed with BRC Imagination Arts, and they were not expecting to be (laughs) because BRC, headed by a young buck named Bob Rogers, who had done work for Disney... Boy, young buck, done work for Disney, there were two strikes against him right there, but he made a fantastic presentation to this group by talking.

At one point in the presentation, he talked about a potential museum for Lord Nelson, the British Naval hero, and the people in the room were just scratching their heads like, why in the world is he talking about Lord Nelson? They couldn't figure it out. But then he was telling them a story about showcasing a single, one-inch artifact and a whole museum built around that. The one-inch artifact was the bullet that killed Lord Nelson. And the way he spun that story in this room of scholars and historians, he had them hooked.

By the end of that story, when he said, "Now, I've told you that story. This museum tells this story, and then you see that one-inch artifact, and suddenly it's not a piece of lead, it's an important historical artifact, the bullet that killed Lord Nelson." They realized this is the storytelling type of museum that we want, because it will bring Lincoln's artifacts to life before you even see them. So by the time you see these artifacts, you know the story behind them; you know why they're significant, and they mean that much more when you see them. You could tell Bob Rogers had done his homework, and he knew what he was doing when he made this presentation. We were **very** impressed with his presentation.

DePue: Were you there during the presentation?

Blanchette: I was there.

DePue: I have heard that story from multiple sides, Bob Roger's version as well. Obviously he goes into great length to talk about it.⁷³ It's an amazing story. Sitting there and listening to this—and by that time you knew quite a bit about Abraham Lincoln and his life and place in American history—did you have a sense of the importance of his story or that story as being central to American history?

Blanchette: I did. I didn't attend all the meetings. I was only in on the meetings where PR decisions were being made. When the core group had a meeting and those

⁷³ Bob Rogers' oral history interview can be found at ([https://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/OralHistory/Organizations and Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/RogersBob.aspx](https://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/OralHistory/Organizations%20and%20Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/RogersBob.aspx))

historians would debate the minutiae of Lincoln's life... I remember one in particular—this was further on in the process, after this incident we're talking about—where they're debating the size of the boot that should be on the mannequins for Abraham Lincoln, whether it should be this size or half-a-size larger. They're debating the authenticity of the size of Lincoln's boot and realizing... This may seem insane, but it's actually important because you're going to get people who take a tape measure and measure the size of Lincoln's boot and say, "Your museum's not authentic because it's size eleven instead of eleven-and-a-half" or whatever it happens to be. [We were] realizing, because there is such a public focus on Lincoln and everything associated with his life, down to the last detail, that the way we tell his story is going to be so important, because if we do even one thing wrong, that's going to be the focus of this museum rather than the Lincoln story itself.

DePue: Was that intense interest by people in the public, and especially the scholars, a good thing or a bad thing in terms of trying to develop the museum?

Blanchette: It's a double-edged sword because we were always looking over our shoulder. But, by the same token, there was a positive interest in what we were doing, like, Lincoln deserves this kind of recognition. So it wasn't hard to get support for the project. But by the same token, we had to be careful we did it right.

DePue: Speaking of support, Jim Edgar is not going to be too involved with this because he's stepping out of office, and you've got George Ryan [39th Illinois Governor, 1999-2003] coming into office. Tell me about the relationship you had with the Ryan administration.

Blanchette: I started out knowing the Ryans because my father had gone to high school with George Ryan. They weren't in the same class, but...

DePue: Both boys from Kankakee.

Blanchette: ...they knew each other. They knew each other from Kankakee, where I grew up, and Lura Lynn [Governor Ryan's wife] actually, he knew Lura Lynn, as well, so we were not starting out as strangers. During the campaign between George Ryan and Glenn Poshard, Susan Mogerma did a very smart thing. She invited both of them to take a look at the Lincoln collection and actually put on the white gloves and hold Lincoln artifacts and just kind of bring them on board with what we were trying to do. It worked like a charm. Both men were absolutely on board with the project before the election even occurred.

I remember there was a... I live in Jacksonville, and there was a fundraiser for George Ryan at one of the hotels in Jacksonville. They asked me, the administration asked me, the HPA administration said, "Why don't you go attend that fundraiser and just kind of press home the message that we would sure like their support for the presidential library project." So I went there. I did not get a chance to talk to George very much. He said, "Oh, Dave, hi, glad you're here," in that deep voice that he had. Next.

But Lura Lynn was standing by the side, and I went up and talked to her. I said, "I know that you know about the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum project. Just want to make sure that you're on board with it." She says, "Oh, honey, I am so on board with that. I think it's the greatest thing." And she said, "I plan to be as involved as I can be in that." We knew we had some support there. She was actually a major dynamo for the whole project, intensely interested in it, attended a lot of the charrette sessions. Whenever we'd run into road blocks, she'd either run interference or talk to her husband, and he'd run interference.

DePue: What was her official capacity?

Blanchette: She was a part of the planning committee...Not planning; by then we knew what the plans were. It was that same core committee. She was a part of that.

DePue: I understand Lee Daniels' [Speaker of the Illinois House of Representatives] wife was also part of that picture?

Blanchette: Yes. She was on the IHPA board of trustees, so she was very involved in several ways. And she involved her husband in that, as well.

DePue: Do you remember her first name?

Blanchette: Pam.

DePue: Pam. So you had the wives of two of the most important politicians in the state...

Blanchette: Doesn't hurt.

DePue: ...deeply involved in this.

Blanchette: Did not hurt a bit.

DePue: Did you take any of the trips to Disneyland, to California?

Blanchette: I took a trip, at BRC expense, as we were getting... We were about halfway done with the museum, and I had mentioned to Bob Rogers, when I was talking to these community groups, that they got just about everything we were talking about as far as exhibits, but they were having trouble with *Ghosts of the Library*.⁷⁴ They couldn't quite understand what that was going to be. I said, "Bob, frankly, I don't understand what it's going to be. I've never seen it. I'm talking about ghosts coming to life on stage, and people are just looking at me like I'm crazy." He said, "Why don't I fly you out to BRC, and you can interact with the technology." I'm like, "Oh my, that'd be great."

⁷⁴ *Ghosts of the Library* is a dramatic, special effects presentation in the ALPM that uses Holavision®, a proprietary BRC Imagination Arts-owned technology, to capture the sense of discovery that scholars and curators feel as they approach a great research collection. (<http://lincolnlbraryandmuseum.com/ghosts.htm>)

So on their dime... Actually, Tom Schwartz was going out to record *Ask Mr. Lincoln*, and Maynard Crossland was going out to do some business.⁷⁵

DePue: So this is pretty late in the development process.

Blanchette: Yeah. So the three of us actually went out there, and I got to interact with a beta version of the *Ghosts of the Library*.

I don't know if I told you this on a previous session or not, but they wanted to get a picture of me interacting with Lincoln's ghost so that I could show these community groups I was speaking to what this looked like. A little trade secret here is the actor on stage of *Ghosts of the Library* can't see the ghost. So you have to know exactly where to stand, exactly how to make your expressions.

I'm standing there on an empty stage, and they can see the ghost, but I can't. They said, "Just interact with the ghost." I said, "How?" They said, "Just make some sort of gesture." So I spread my hands apart and went, "Ta-da." They took a picture, and they say, "Oh, no, we got to redo the picture. That just won't work at all." Well, one of my hands was actually placed where I was goosing Lincoln (both laugh). I thought, "Yeah, we need to redo that." I kept that picture just for myself.

Then we did a more sedate one, where I was interacting in a more restrained way, and we actually used that picture. Maynard Crossland also interacted with the ghost. Sometimes I'd use his picture as well. I think Tom Schwartz did [interact with the ghost] as well. We kind of threw those together. But I just think it's interesting that my first interaction with the sixteenth president of the United States, I'm giving him his Christmas goose (both laugh).

DePue: That's a picture I want to get my hands on; we need to include that in this interview transcript. Again, we're going back and forth here. But can you tell me Dick Durbin's [U.S. senator from Illinois] initial involvement with this as well? I think he was member of the U.S. House of Representatives at that time.

Blanchette: He was, and he was always a big help. He's a big Lincoln fan, and he was able to go to Congress and help secure what turned into a multi-year funding commitment from Congress. He was instrumental in getting the Illinois delegation on board with the project, from both sides of the aisle. He would send his representative, Bill Houlihan, to a lot of our planning meetings. I know that Susan Mogerman talked to him constantly. They knew each other

⁷⁵*Ask Mr. Lincoln*, housed in a small viewing room at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum, is where former Illinois State Historian Tom Schwartz, on tape, gives opinions and use quotes to demonstrate how the president would have responded to questions of today. (<https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-ent-0117-museum-lincoln-20130116-column.html>)

personally, but she would also talk to him and keep him as up-to-speed as possible. He was a huge help and continued to be a big supporter when he was U.S. senator.

DePue: I know, hearing the story from Julie Cellini in particular, he was the one who helped them make the connections out in Disneyland in the first place.

Blanchette: That I'm not familiar with.

DePue: Did you go on any the trips to other museums?

Blanchette: I did not.

DePue: We've already talked about it, but did it make sense to you that, early on in this process, the team decided that it was important that the exhibit design team be in the lead, ahead of the architect?

Blanchette: That was very controversial when it was first broached. To the core group's credit, they decided—I think it all started with Bob Rogers' storytelling when he first met the group—they decided we need this to be a story-driven museum rather than an artifact-driven museum. Yes, the artifacts are the stars of the show, but you don't have a show if you don't have a story. So that decision was made to let the cover of the book reflect what the pages of the story are telling, rather than shoehorn a story into a pre-made book cover. That's the way that it transpired.

Now, this is not something architects like because architects like to have their design drive everything. Yes, they meet with a client, and they find out what the client needs, but they don't like to be told, "Here's what's inside; design something around it." So there were some rough spots, throughout the project actually, when measurements were off; things had to be redone because it was just a way in which the architectural firm was not used to dealing with a project.

DePue: And was that primarily Gyo Obata who was involved with that from the architecture side?

Blanchette: He had people on his staff who were the main movers and shakers. Yes, he was heavily involved in it, but the day-to-day drawings and meeting with contractors onsite and everything, he had people from the firm that were actually onsite doing that. He would visit from time-to-time. I remember, closer to the museum opening, jumping ahead... Sorry we're jumping around so much.

DePue: No, no, fine.

Blanchette: Closer to the museum opening—it was probably a couple weeks beforehand—we were putting finishing touches on things, and I happened to be in the museum building. The security guy comes up, and he says, "Dave, there's an old guy out front with a cane who wants to come in, says he's the architect." (laughs) I said, "I'll go and see what he wants." It was Gyo Obata, and he said,

"Oh, I'm sorry, I should have called in advance, but I just wanted to come in and test the sound." I said, "Test the sound?" He says, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I just had a question in my mind about how the sound would echo in the plaza."

I let him in, and he walked into the central plaza area. He took his cane and tapped it on the floor and listened to how the sound echoed. Well, there are slats of wood that are built into portions of the plaza area. They're nicely placed, so they don't stand out, but their whole function was to help deaden some of the echo in that large open space. And he apparently was satisfied that the sound was what it was supposed to be because he thanked me and left and later on sent me a nice book and a nice note, which I have kept away for my grandkids.

DePue: Does that mean he didn't really need the cane?

Blanchette: I don't know if it was an affectation, or if he actually needed it. But he used it to test the sound that day.

DePue: You mentioned that there was friction between the architect and the exhibit design team. Was that something that posed problems for you as the press guy? Was that something known to the public at all?

Blanchette: It only did when it manifested itself into delays or unexpected increases in cost, more the delays than anything. There were unrealistic promises made, I think, early on about when things would be done. That forced two successive gubernatorial administrations to try and hurry things up, with semi-disastrous results for the initial opening of the library and problems, but not insurmountable problems, for the opening of the museum.

DePue: You mentioned Tom Schwartz, the state historian at that time, unquestionably, the most knowledgeable person on Lincoln on the IHPA staff. Would you agree with that?

Blanchette: I would agree with that.

DePue: How important was he in terms of getting the history right? And were you involved at all with that process?

Blanchette: I was not involved with getting the history right, and this thing couldn't have been done without Tom's input. I can't stress how important it was. Almost everything you see presented at the museum has Tom's stamp on it in some way or another, so [he was] absolutely vital to the project.

DePue: How about the design of the exhibit plan in the first place? Were you pretty much outside that whole process?

Blanchette: Yeah, I was not involved in the design. I was only brought in when decisions were made and needed to be made public. That's when I was brought in. Now, if that involved me understanding how the decision was made, yes. I'd be brought into those meetings, so I could understand what went in. I was in on some of those meetings, and frequently Bob Rogers was in on those meetings.

Now, Bob Rogers is a P.T. Barnum.⁷⁶ He knows his publicity; he knows how to get publicity. Whenever I was in on a meeting, he would go out of his way to talk about things in public relations terms, hoping that I would get it. Of course I got it, Bob; that's my job (laughs). But I appreciated also that he was doing things with an eye toward making my job easier.

To this day, Bob and I still talk about things. I'm no longer involved with the library/museum, but I've written stories about it for the news media, and to this day, I still talk with him when I need a question answered about something.

DePue: Were a lot of those conversations based on specific exhibits in the museum?

Blanchette: They were. They were. And I remember talking with him about the *Whispering Gallery*, which has negative stories about Lincoln. He says, "You know, as a former journalist, you're going to appreciate this." (laughs) And [talking with him about] *Ghosts of the Library*.

DePue: What I have done with some of the other people, especially Bob Rogers himself and Julie Cellini, I went through exhibit by exhibit to get some reaction. I wouldn't expect you to have as much in-depth knowledge as either one of them. But if you don't mind, I'll just run through these quickly, and if you have comments, that's great, and if you don't...

Blanchette: Sure.

DePue: You can respond from the perspective of how you would present all of this to the public. The first one is not really an exhibit itself but the plaza area and the design of that, and why it was so large in the first place. Any comments with respect to that?

Blanchette: I think the idea was... Since we didn't want to translate the text in the museum into 130 different languages for everybody who could possibly visit, they wanted something that told the Lincoln story in one visual sweep. So you've got a log cabin; you've got storm clouds; you've got the White House; you've got the Lincoln family there. So visitors that walk in there, no matter what nationality they are, they can look at this, left to right...log cabin left, storm clouds center, White House right. In one normal, visual sweep of left to right, you can tell, born in a log cabin, life full of storminess, was president of the United States.

DePue: We're going to have a conversation a little later on about all of the figures that are there. You mentioned the family. Was there any sense at the time, how popular it was going to be to have everybody get their picture taken with the Lincoln family, right in the middle of the plaza?

⁷⁶ P.T. Barnum was a showman, politician, and businessman who founded a well-known circus in the late 1800s, ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P. T. Barnum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P._T._Barnum))

Blanchette: A lot of people hated that idea when it was broached. In fact, shortly after the museum opened, we still caught a lot of heat for it. They called it Disneyesque. They kept thinking it would be like the animatronic Lincoln at Disney World, so yeah (laughs). That came to be more and more appreciated only after the museum was open, and people saw how popular it was for people to get their pictures with the Lincolns, and how great a PR thing that was to have these on people's Christmas cards and websites and blogs and everything. By golly, Bob Rogers knew what he was talking about (laughs).

DePue: I'm sure one of the things Bob talked to you about—with the intent that you would pass it on to the public, and the public would be wowed—is the incredible extent they went to get the details right for the log cabin, including finding trees over in Indiana someplace and making casts of all those trees.

Blanchette: Well, the trees, the castings were from the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois, as I understand it. But they were actual castings of the trees. The wood for the log cabin, they found, I believe it was in Virginia, a 200 year-old log cabin was being dismantled for a road project, I believe, so they acquired 200 year-old wood. So the wood on the log cabin is contemporary with Abraham Lincoln. That's a story I love to tell because when I give people tours of the museum I'll say, "Touch this wood on the log cabin. You're touching some wood that was being used in a log cabin when Lincoln was alive."

DePue: So it's not just the story of Lincoln. In this case, it's the story of creation of all these exhibits. That kind of thing captured the public's attention, as well?

Blanchette: It does and continues to, because I still talk about the development of the museum. Another thing that people like to hear about is the stove in the White House kitchen. The stove is authentic; it's not a reproduction. We've got a picture of the White House kitchen in 1863, I believe. Rather than reproduce it, one of the exhibit team decided, let's just go on eBay and see if we can find this.⁷⁷ Well, they found one on eBay (laughs). So an authentic stove, same make, model and year, they found on eBay. So when you go through, and you touch that stove, you're actually touching something that was being used as a stove when Lincoln was president.

DePue: Once you get past that log cabin and seeing Lincoln in the corner, reading the book. Then you go out, and you see that slave auction. From everybody's perspective that seems to be one of the most important exhibits there.

Blanchette: That wasn't how it was at first envisioned. As I recall—and I might have been brought in one of the later sessions—when I first became aware of the debate over the slavery issue, they were talking about taking the famous photograph

⁷⁷ eBay is a popular e-commerce corporation that facilitates consumer-to-consumer and business-to-consumer sales. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EBay>)

that's in the library's collection of the slave who's escaped to Union territory. He's posing for the camera with flogging scars across his back.

They were talking about making that very large, and as people round the corner and see that, they'll know that people were almost beaten to death and often were beaten to death, and that's the worst evil of slavery.

I think it was Edna Greene Medford, one of the scholars on the core committee who said, "No, the worst evil of slavery was the tearing apart of families. The family structure was just torn apart. You need to depict that, and that will show people the primary evil of slavery." That eventually morphed into the slave auction exhibit at the very moment a family is being torn apart, and this is the last time they'll see each other.

To this day, if you go into the museum, and you stand there long enough, and you watch people come around and take a look at that, you'll see people still tear up because of the emotional impact of that exhibit.

DePue: Not too far down the road after that exhibit, you get to young Lincoln's career, meeting Mary, on the courting couch, and the law office, the kids in the law office. I know there was some discussion between Bob Rogers and his vision and others who perhaps wanted to reign him in just a little bit on the vision. Do you have any insights into that discussion?

Blanchette: Yes, it's a very colorful story (laughs). William Herndon, had very detailed accounts of what it was like living and working with Abraham Lincoln, and Bob Rogers grabbed onto a story which he just dearly wanted to present in there, of one day when Lincoln brought the kids to the office, as he often did. While he was lying on the couch reading the paper, one of the boys was peeing in the stove, to the extent that Bob, even in his mind, had the steam and the sound effects built into this. They said, "Whoa, whoa, Bob. We're not having boys peeing (laughs) as part of our museum." So they toned it down.

If you can imagine playing baseball with an inkwell and a broom being toned down, well, it actually is being toned down. That's actually one of my favorite scenes because it tells people something they probably don't know about Lincoln, that he was a very permissive parent. He and Mary were very permissive. They spoiled their kids rotten. It's just something people don't expect to learn when they come through. Then they see that scene, and suddenly they realize, okay, Lincoln's lying on the couch reading the paper; his kids are running amuck; I get it (laughs). So that's a really good scene.

But knowing how it started out, I can still, in my mind's eye, imagine one of the little Lincoln boys peeing in the stove and the steam and what public reaction would have been.

DePue: Bob would still like to see it happen that way. Did you get pulled into any of these discussions, these debates about the details of the exhibits?

- Blanchette: Not very often. Like I said, when I did, it was only on a rare occasion where they wanted to know what's the public going to think if we do this, or what are they going to think if we do that?" I didn't make the decisions. I just would offer advice. It seems like they followed the advice. They were very concerned about how the public perceived this, because we knew we were under a microscope.
- DePue: Why? Why was this going to be scrutinized beyond the point of it just being about Abraham Lincoln?
- Blanchette: Because we were spending so much money on it. They wanted to make sure they were getting the most bang for their buck. It was an ungodly sum of money, people thought. They were thinking, This better be good.
- DePue: Were the exhibits in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum qualitatively different from exhibits in most other museums around the country?
- Blanchette: Not so much individually, but as a package and the way they told a story and the way they draw you in to the story, make you feel part of the story, and give you an emotional attachment to the story. It's not the individual parts; it's the whole that makes it a success.
- DePue: The next place you go on the journey you get to see the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and then you go into the 1860 election. That was quite an innovative approach to portraying that election. Can you talk about that? Were you involved in that at all?
- Blanchette: I sat in on one of the sessions where they were arguing, and it was a very heated argument. The historians initially were very much against using television coverage to do the message. Their argument was, they didn't have TV; they wouldn't have covered things that way back then. Let's use original sources; tell the story that way.

But some people did some convincing. I think Bob Rogers said, "The average person's attention span is two-and-a-half, three minutes. You've got to get the most important and complex presidential election in U.S. history into the public's mind, have them understand it, and get them out into the next gallery in about two minutes to three minutes. If you use original source material, you can't do that. Let's put original source material on one of the walls—which you can see some of that—but for most of the general public, let's put it in a form that they're used to getting their political discourse, and that's television coverage on election night."

Once we had that in the can, then some upstart—I don't know who it was—suggested that we have a recognizable television journalist present it. Then they got Tim Russert to do it.⁷⁸ After a couple of false starts with Tim

⁷⁸ Tim Russert is an American television journalist who appeared for more than sixteen years as the moderator of NBC's *Meet the Press*. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim_Russert)

Russert and the fact that he arrived late for his taping to do it, he only got to do it in one take.

DePue: But a journalist, a professional journalist.

Blanchette: That makes that somewhat believable, though. I used to be in broadcasting, and I did election coverage, and you aren't polished on election night.

DePue: Did any of that argument that was going on when they were initially talking about designing that exhibit translate into difficulties for you in laying this out to the public?

Blanchette: No. Once the decision was made... That was one of the ones we kept under wraps kind of, until closer to the end. We just said there will be coverage of the campaign of 1860. We didn't go into a lot of detail because that was still a controversial way, as far as historians were concerned, of dealing with that. So we kind of kept the details of that under wraps until closer to the opening.

DePue: How was the public response to that?

Blanchette: Very positive. They love it, especially the campaign commercials. And the taglines at the end, "Paid for by Little Giants for Douglas." People love that kind of stuff.

DePue: (laughs) Because they can relate to it in their own lives.

Blanchette: Oh, yeah, yeah.

DePue: That gets us done with *Journey One*. *Journey One* starts with the log cabin. *Journey Two* starts with the White House. What are your thoughts—this is a personal reflection—on the scale of the White House? It's pretty close to being real life. It's big.

Blanchette: It's almost 100 percent. My understanding—Bob Rogers told me this; it might not be true; I don't know—he said if they would have made it full size, it would have jugged out onto Jefferson Street and [I]DOT [Illinois Department of Transportation] would not have appreciated that (laughs). So it's like seven-eighths scale, whatever. But it's close enough that it looks life size.

DePue: What did you think about the figures then? We see some more figures scattered all the way through the museum, but there's several key historical figures outside the White House.

Blanchette: Once the decision was made to use a lot of figures, it was pretty much gravy from there on out. No, these people wouldn't have been at the White House at the same time, but still it gives you a sense of the personalities of these people, without having to have a separate section on this is what McClellan was like; this is what Grant was like; this is what Sojourner Truth was like or Frederick Douglass.

It gives you a sense of who these people are, the dignity of Sojourner Truth, the pride of Frederick Douglass, the haughtiness of George McClellan, the unkempt professionalism of Ulysses S. Grant. You just see that, by the figures. So you don't have to spend a lot of time interpreting that. You just go, and you say, "Oh, okay. I get it. This is how Grant was different than McClellan."

DePue: You go through the doors, and the first thing you see after that are the gowns, the gorgeous gowns, with Mary and some of her social rivals. They aren't actually figurines, but the dresses are behind that. As the press guy, as the guy who probably professionally should know what kinds of things the public would want to see, did that make sense to you?

Blanchette: It did. Fashions and food are always of interest to people, fashions, food, and war. We do two out of three (laughs) in this museum. That was always... In fact, when I'd speak to women's groups, that was always something that got their attention. At least with the public, that was a very popular thing, from day one.

DePue: Then you've got the Fort Sumter Mural; they decided to portray that in a mural. And following that, I believe, is the *Cartoon Gallery*.

Blanchette: The *Whispering Gallery*, with original newspaper accounts and editorial cartoons and actual comments. The comments are spoken, so people who have visual impairments can actually experience that as well. I kind of like that and the funhouse atmosphere. It's one of my favorite parts of the museum because most of my professional career I've dealt with journalism and the negative impact of journalism. And that just kind of drives home the fact that the more things change the more they stay the same.

DePue: But it's not the thing that you see in most other presidential libraries or museums.

Blanchette: No. We decided early on we were going to present Lincoln, warts and all, the Lincoln story, warts and all. You don't want to put him on a pedestal. You want to make him a real human being, and you show that a lot of the country hated Lincoln. He's almost universally revered now, but at the time, fewer than 50 percent of those voting voted for Lincoln. And nobody was happy with him during the early months of the Civil War, North and South, or Great Britain even. You see this criticism from all over. He had to sneak into Washington, DC, for god's sake, because that's how unpopular he was.

DePue: Did you as the press guy buy in on presenting the warts as well?

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: And was that accepted by the public, from what you understand?

Blanchette: Most of the public. I think there are a lot of people that revere Lincoln that were worried that we might overdo it and that it would be a negative portrayal

of Lincoln. No, it's not negative. It's a realistic portrayal. It's not idealistic; it's realistic. The guy was a great guy. Present him as a regular human being, with troubles and foibles and tragedy just like the rest of us. It makes his accomplishments that much better than if he were this god on a pedestal.

DePue: The comment that I typically hear in that—and there's another one that's going to come later—in portraying Lincoln and the kinds of criticism he was drawing is, "Well, I guess politics hasn't really changed that much."

Blanchette: It really hasn't. Up until relatively recent history, people were at least civil and would work with each other. But during the Civil War, you had actual congressmen just walking out of Congress. So if there's any parallels to what's happening today and the divisions today, you go back to the 1860s; there you have it.

DePue: Following closely after that is the scene where Mary is hovering over the bed, with Willie in the bed, and then immediately after that you see her mourning the loss of Willie. Any comments about that one?

Blanchette: Only the fact that, if people are listening to this interview and you visit the museum, next time you're in that scene notice how it feels chillier in those two scenes? That's because it is. Bob Rogers very slyly designed it so that you feel the chill of death. The temperature's actually a few degrees cooler in those areas. He wanted to heighten the emotional experience by having shivers run up your spine.

DePue: The next one you've talked about a little bit already because you've got the stove and the kitchen area. I think the title of that particular exhibit is *Rumors in the Kitchen*. I know Julie Cellini's a bit disappointed. She referred to it as something of a pass-through, that people aren't paying much attention to what's going on when they walk through there. Your impression?

Blanchette: This goes in with the food, food, fashion, and war. The people that I observed going through are interested in what kind of food they were serving at the White House. As far as we can tell, what we have presented is pretty authentic, oysters, hams, hard-boiled eggs. Lincoln liked to eat hard-boiled egg. I guess that was his breakfast every day, a single hard-boiled egg, from what I understand. Not so much a disappointment...

I don't know what it was envisioned to be initially. I suppose it's correct that you hear things being talked about on the loudspeaker overhead, but I don't know how much people pay attention to that.

DePue: The next one, you get to the whole issue of the Emancipation Proclamation.⁷⁹ So you've got the slavery one, and now you've got the seminal event in his

⁷⁹ The Emancipation Proclamation was issued by President Lincoln in 1863 to free the slaves. (<https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation>).

administration, the Emancipation Proclamation. Any comments to make about the series of exhibits that deal with that?

Blanchette: The cabinet room scene sticks out in my mind because they wanted to make that as authentic as possible, down to the last minute detail, including the little cord that he can pull to summon someone to bring him tea, to the portrait of, I think it's Andrew Jackson [7th U.S. president, 1829-1837], up on the wall, if I'm not mistaken, as well as the bad toupee on one of the cabinet member's heads.

DePue: I think that's Gideon Welles.⁸⁰

Blanchette: They wanted to make that as authentic as possible and have their facial expressions convey what they were thinking when Lincoln sprung this on them. [It's] authentic, down to the view from the White House window, where you have a partially completed Washington Monument in the background. So you're giving all these history lessons, just by letting people look at things.

It was presented so well that many years later, when Steven Spielberg was planning his movie *Lincoln*, he sent people to the museum.⁸¹ They spent a lot of time taking pictures and taking measurements of that room, and you will see that reflected in that movie. A lot of the action takes place in the cabinet room. If you've been to our cabinet room, and you watch that movie, it will be very familiar to you.

DePue: I didn't know that. I think the next piece that's also part of that is all the criticism after the *Emancipation Proclamation* is disseminated, is the *Whispering Gallery*.

Blanchette: Yeah. I wasn't in on that decision. It's kind of a cacophony as you walk through there. But if you're a visitor, and you spend time in front of one of the talking faces and hear actually what they have to say, yes, it's a lot of criticism of Lincoln, but I think someone is also asking for a job for their nephew. It gives you kind of a sense for the kind of stuff that a president's got to go through every day. It's not just policy, but it's kind of the mundane, "Hey, my nephew needs a job." I like it.

DePue: When you were in the role of having to sell this whole notion and talking about some of the specific exhibits, would that one and the *Whispering Gallery*... Well, the *Whispering Gallery* is the cartoons or...?

Blanchette: The *Whispering Gallery* is the newspaper editorials and legal cartoons.

DePue: I think I had the name of that one incorrect then. So the criticism over the *Emancipation Proclamation*, those are the ones that give you a much different

⁸⁰ Gideon Welles was U.S. Secretary of the Navy 1861-1869. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gideon_Welles)

⁸¹ *Lincoln* was an American film directed and produced by Steven Spielberg. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_(film))).

view of Abraham Lincoln. Was that something you would emphasize when you talk to people out in the...

Blanchette: I think, with the emancipation series of galleries, since there were several of them, I would just simply say it's going to tell you how controversial this decision was, that it was the most radical departure from existing U.S. policy the country had ever seen. People don't appreciate that, and this is going to make you appreciate that. I didn't really get into a lot of the details of it.

DePue: The next one is possibly one of the most popular exhibits in the museum, that's the *Civil War Gallery*. It includes the *Civil War in Four Minutes*.⁸² How early in the process were you made aware of that portion?

Blanchette: Pretty early because they had to do the research on the casualties. And, as I understand it, that's the first time they had done a specific tally, week-by-week, of the casualties, both by musket and saber, as well as disease and starvation. So it was breaking new historical ground with that.

But it also was a great place to showcase images from the library, and they wanted those images to be accessible. So you've got a whole wall of these images and then an electronic screen where you can access some and get caption information. That wasn't a hard sell. People are into the Civil War, and they were just glad to see that we were going to deal with the Civil War.

DePue: Did you have a sense of how popular that *Civil War in Four Minutes* would become?

Blanchette: Not until I saw it done and running did I realize, "Oh, we'd better be selling this in our gift shop because this is pretty good."

DePue: That brings us to another question. There are no weapons in the museum. Were you involved in the discussions about whether or not there should be weapons displayed?

Blanchette: No, I was not.

DePue: Do you have any comments about that debate?

Blanchette: Not really. It was not something that the public ever mentioned. It's not something that they missed. I have my own thoughts. I think there ought to be some in there. But that was a decision that was made, and I don't think the public misses it.

⁸² *The Civil War in Four Minutes* presents an overview of the causes, campaigns, and conclusion of the American Civil War, the key events that led to the outbreak of the war, and why its effect on the nation is still so visible today. This video is part of the American Battlefield Trust's In4 video series, which presents short videos on basic Civil War topics. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch/44wJ1gnBK0c>)

- DePue: So you never got any questions or criticisms about the lack of weapons?
- Blanchette: No, no.
- DePue: Then you go on to the telegraph office and the series of photos, very telling photos, of Lincoln as he aged in office. And then you get to Ford's Theatre. I think there is also some information about Gettysburg, murals.
- Blanchette: Yeah, the big mural.
- DePue: And Ford's Theatre.
- Blanchette: Regarding the big mural of Gettysburg, though, the artist that did that, for the first couple of years after we were open, he would come a couple of times a year and touch up areas of the painting. He was a perfectionist, and he would come back. I remember one time he modified one of the soldiers at the battle. He had him have his foot blown off; he modified the painting that way. On another one, he changed the guy's expression as he was getting shot, just minor things that the public wouldn't notice, but the artist did, and we noticed. That was constantly being updated the first couple of years by the artist.
- DePue: That's interesting, too. That says something about his commitment to make sure it's right, in his mind at least.
- Blanchette: Right.
- DePue: Ford's Theatre and the assassination was obviously one of the other seminal moments in Lincoln's life. Did Bob Rogers tell you anything about that? Was that a portion he was excited about?
- Blanchette: I don't know who initially made the recommendation. They thought that, in keeping with the whiz-bang factor of the museum, that they ought to do the derringer shot and the commotion that followed the assassination.⁸³ But that was quickly overruled. I think consensus was, "Nah, let's not do that. Let's treat Lincoln's dying with dignity." So, instead of the moment of death, you get the last happy moment in Abraham and Mary's life. They're cuddling in the box, and you see John Wilkes Booth about ready to come in. Everybody knows what happens, so you don't need to have a gun go off, although we do have the gun go off in *Lincoln's Eyes* (laughs).
- DePue: How about the lying in state?
- Blanchette: Authentic down to the last detail, except the coffin is closed. There was some debate about whether we have an open coffin and make it authentic, or do we have a closed coffin, so children don't say, "Why is Lincoln that funny color?"

⁸³ A derringer is a small-sized handgun, and one was used in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derringer>)

because of the long trip from DC and being embalmed a number of times.⁸⁴ So they decided, let's not even make that an issue; we'll have the coffin closed. But other than that, it's authentic in every detail, as far as we can determine.

DePue: Did you get any questions or have any discussions about the scale of that room? That portion is very large; there's a lot of space that's dedicated to him lying in state.

Blanchette: Not a lot about the scale. The only questions I've heard from the public are, "Was his coffin really that gaudy?" (laughs) Yes, it was.

DePue: Which was reinforced here recently when we commemorated the hundredth and fiftieth anniversary of the funeral, the funeral procession. The *Treasures Gallery*... After you get done with all of this, you go through *Lying in State*, and then you get to the *Treasures Gallery*. You've already talked about the decisions that you had in the story of his life. Do you think people walk into the *Treasures Gallery* with this heightened sense of the importance of the documents and the items that are there?

Blanchette: I think they do, and they're in the mood to see it because you've just been through two very somber exhibits. So you go through all the wow factor, gee-whiz type stuff, and then you get the somberness. So you're in the right frame of mind. You have this emotional attachment. You've had these emotional roller coasters. And then you're kind of in a quiet reflective mood, and then all of a sudden here's these treasures. If it looks like the Crown Jewels Gallery in the Tower of London, that's entirely by design, because these are our crown jewels.⁸⁵ And it does look amazingly like that gallery, if you've been to see those at the Tower of London.

DePue: You'd be the guy who probably hears this. People come out, and then they expect to see the Emancipation Proclamation; they expect to see the Gettysburg Address. And quite often, most of the time, those documents are not on display.

Blanchette: Right. And to this day it's still a chore to explain to people that, in order to preserve these items for future generations, to make them last longer, you have to give them a rest from public display. Even though the light levels are low, even though the conditions are right in there, anytime you have something on display, you have minute degradation of the artifact.

So the way we explained it was, "We have 60,000 items; we'll rotate items on display; we'll show you as much of our collection as possible; we'll try to have a big ticket item of some sort always on display and supporting artifacts," but that these artifacts need to have a rest. To this day, from my

⁸⁴ After Lincoln's assassination, a funeral train transported his remains from Washington, DC, to Springfield, Illinois for burial.

⁸⁵ The crown jewels are the regalia worn by British kings and queens at their coronations. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crown_Jewels_of_the_United_Kingdom)

understanding, people still say, "Well, where's the stovepipe hat? Where's the Gettysburg Address? Where's the Emancipation Proclamation?" It's something the volunteers are constantly having to answer for.

DePue: Did you get any criticisms in that respect in the press?

Blanchette: I don't think so. The press understood that. They're more pragmatic and fact-oriented and less swayed by emotion. That's the kind of response that's emotional rather than practical.

DePue: Here's something I think you can talk about the press reaction to, the *Tide Turns and Washington Celebrates*. There are a couple of murals in a couple of different places—I'm sure you can talk to specifics better than I can—where people who were prominent in the creation and the development of the library/museum are portrayed in a couple of these drawings, in these paintings.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: Bill Cellini, Julie Cellini, Tom Schwartz, Susan Mogerman. I think there are a couple others.

Blanchette: Maynard Crossland, Bob Coomer. Those are the ones I'm aware of.

DePue: I'll turn it over to you. What's the story there?

Blanchette: All right, I'll tell you the story I was told and the story I suspect. The story I was told was that the artist that did those paintings always liked to have live models because the paintings looked better when they would have live models. Well, rather than pick just Joe and Jane off the street as models, they used photographs of people actually working on the project. I think that may be partially true, because you could use photographs of anybody; you wouldn't have to use people who were involved in the project. I think that it was just a way of thanking people and honoring people for what they did for the project.

DePue: How about the allegations or the suspicions that these people wanted to have their images somewhere in the museum?

Blanchette: As I understand it, all these people were surprised when they saw themselves (laughs) in these pieces of art.

DePue: Did they all recognize themselves?

Blanchette: No. I know they didn't. It was a surprise when it was pointed out to them, "Hey, you're here."

DePue: It was Ray Long of the *Chicago Tribune* that found out about this, I think about the time that the museum opened in 2005, an April 14 article.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: How did **he** find out about it?

Blanchette: Somebody told him.

DePue: What was the nature of his criticism?

Blanchette: Ray was being told... I know Ray. I've dealt with him for a large number of years, a good reporter. His editors told him, "We're not going to do the same rah-rah piece everyone else is doing about this. You find some of the chinks in the armor. Do whatever you need to do. Let's approach this a different way." So he got hold of somebody, either on the project or who volunteered or probably several people, who were able to tell him, "Okay, you want to know what's wrong with this place? Here's what's wrong."

Most of it was nitpicky stuff, like the script in *Lincoln's Eyes*. Some of the quotes that are used are paraphrased rather than direct quotes, and it doesn't say, "This is a paraphrase of a quote." It presents it as the person saying it. Well, that's minor. But the major thing that came out of that was the people in the paintings. Since I had never been told officially that, "Yes, these are the people in these paintings," I could honestly say, "Well, I'm not sure if those are the people or if they just resemble those people."

He did a major piece about every single, little thing that you could imagine that was either questionable or what he phrased as inaccurate because of the paraphrase versus the direct quotes. That did us some harm, but it also did us some good because then you had people coming in saying, "Well, I've got to see this for myself." (laughs) So it actually had the reverse effect of boosting attendance a little bit I think.

DePue: You just anticipated my question.

Blanchette: And I know Bob Rogers, his philosophy is, whatever brings them in, whatever brings paying customers in is worth it.

DePue: And once they got to the museum, the average citizen Joe and Jane liked what they saw?

Blanchette: They did.

DePue: We've talked about a couple of these other things already. *Ghosts of the Library*, part of that was the curator, Thomas, named after Tom Schwartz, I was told.

Blanchette: Yes, yes it was.

DePue: Did Tom know that ahead of time?

Blanchette: If he didn't know, he certainly would suspect it.

DePue: Any other comments you've got for *Ghosts of the Library*? That apparently was one of the things that you talked to the public about when you were trying to sell this.

Blanchette: It's probably one of my favorite areas of the museum. I still don't tire of watching it. Even knowing exactly how the technology works, I'm still amazed at how it looks from the audience. I always have a sense of satisfaction when I see the show, and it's packed full of people, and once it's over they applaud. And they say, "Wow, how'd they do that?" Or just "Wow." It just gives me a sense of pride to have been involved with that.

DePue: And the other big theater production is *Lincoln's Eyes*.⁸⁶

Blanchette: Right.

DePue: Was that another one of the things that you would sell when you went out on the stump?

Blanchette: One of the major ones because it had the most theatrical flourish, the cannons belching smoke, the seats rumbling, the scenery flying in and out. So that would be something that I would spend some time on, a multiscreen, surround sensation theater that talks about Lincoln's life and legacy. Yes, I would dwell on that.

I was pretty much aware of how that was going to be put together, so it wasn't difficult to describe that. I would just say there would be special effects built in for the audience. I wouldn't give away the fact that your seats rumble or that smoke rings blow across the audience. I would just say, "You'll be surrounded by the experience."

DePue: Putting aside the things that people would talk about when they came out, which would be the smoke rings and the seats rumbling and that kind of stuff, do you think it was a good way to portray who Abraham Lincoln was?

Blanchette: Yes. And that particular show is presented as a story. It's an artist telling a story. The whole museum tells a story, and here's another story within a story. He's kind of folksy. He's got kind of a nice way of talking. And that's another show that presents Lincoln, warts and all. So it's in keeping with the whole theme of the museum.

DePue: And the artist is J. William Thomas?

Blanchette: There you go. There's Thomas again.

DePue: Well, and from what I understand, J as in Jay Mogergerman, William as in Bill Cellini, and Thomas as in Tom Schwartz.

Blanchette: Yeah. I don't know about the first two but I know the last name is for Tom Schwartz.

⁸⁶ *Lincoln's Eyes* is a 17-minute, fully automated special effects production presented in the Union Theater at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum. Shown on multiple screens, it tells the story of Abraham Lincoln as seen by his contemporaries, friend and foe. (https://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/xxmuseum/Education/Documents/ALPLM_ExperienceTRP.pdf)

- DePue: I think I got that from Bob Rogers. That was something that maybe didn't even get in the press someplace.
- Blanchette: Yeah, that didn't get in the press.
- DePue: And whether it's Bob Rogers or his creative team, their homage to the people who were behind the scenes making this happen, perhaps.
- Blanchette: Yes.
- DePue: Do you have a problem with that approach?
- Blanchette: Nope, not at all. These people deserve all the accolades they can get and many more so, especially Julie and Bill Cellini, and especially George and Lura Lynn Ryan. If there are four people that deserve more credit for this than they have gotten, it would be those four people.
- DePue: The irony is two of them that you've mentioned here have spent time in jail.
- Blanchette: Not for anything involving this project.
- DePue: *Ask Mr. Lincoln*, any background on that, how that one came about?
- Blanchette: I don't know whose idea that was. But it seems to work.
- DePue: I think that might be one of the ones that would be up for grabs if there were some changes made in the museum.
- Blanchette: Yeah, you can update that technology. It was state-of-the-art for then, but I think that's a target for updating, that technology, yes.
- DePue: *Mrs. Lincoln's Attic*, a decision that you had to have some place for the kids to go, and the restaurant, the gift shop. Any comments about any of that?
- Blanchette: No. I think everyone agreed you needed a children's area, and wouldn't it be neat to have these things in it. I think that's the way it pretty much ended up being. I remember the initial drawings of that area and how it ended up, and it's pretty close to the way they had it initially drawn.
- Having a restaurant, there was always felt to be the need for that. That way people could stay longer in the museum. Gift shop, they wanted to make sure they had plenty of area for a very large, successful gift shop operation. And it has been very successful.
- DePue: Well, as Bob Rogers would say, that's the measure of whether or not you've done your job well, in terms of designing the exhibits. Are they buying things? Are they buying books, in particular? Has the public bought a healthy number of books, leaving the museum?
- Blanchette: They have. It's one of the more successful gift shop operations of any history museum in the country.
- DePue: How about the music that you hear all the way through the museum?

Blanchette: That's a masterwork. It was created by David Kneupper.⁸⁷ He worked closely with Bob Rogers' people, both in the types of music, in adaptations of existing nineteenth century tunes, but also the way that the speakers are placed and the way the music is synced and timed, that it's homogeneous and that you can walk from one room to another and hear a completely different piece of music in each room, yet it flows; it's not jarring. It was done that way. It's one of those subtle things that just makes the experience that much better.

DePue: The next one is the temporary exhibit space. There is a decent amount of space committed to rotating exhibits, temporary exhibits, however you want to say it. Were you involved in the discussions about what kinds of exhibits should be there?

Blanchette: No, but I remember that space, precisely because one of the first things Richard Norton Smith did when he was hired as the first executive director was say, "We need a bigger temporary exhibit space." He talked about when he was at the Ford Museum. [Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, which Richard Smith previously directed.] He had some kind of art exhibit. People came to see... They lined up around the block to see that temporary exhibit. And those were people who wouldn't normally come to a presidential museum.

He says, "We absolutely have to have a bigger temporary exhibit space." So the design was modified to almost double the space in there. I was not involved in the decision on what the first exhibit was going to be, but when I heard what it was going to be I thought, "That's good."

DePue: Was that *Blood on the Moon*?⁸⁸

Blanchette: Yeah. And it was a good exhibit. But people weren't coming to see that. They were coming to see Lincoln anyway, and it was just kind of like icing on the cake; it's that much more Lincoln.

As we progressed farther on... Sometimes we would heed Bob Rogers' advice, "You've got to give them something they can't normally see in the Lincoln Museum." We did that with the Annie Leibovitz exhibit, which I helped get here.⁸⁹ But I think, by and large, they've hewn pretty close to the Lincoln or Civil War history, which was not in keeping with the original

⁸⁷ David Kneupper's oral history interview can be found at [https://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/OralHistory/Organizations and Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/KneupperDavid.aspx](https://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/OralHistory/Organizations%20and%20Agencies/ihpalegacy/Pages/KneupperDavid.aspx).

⁸⁸ *Blood on the Moon* was the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum's first temporary exhibit and featured an unprecedented collection of artifacts, including Abraham Lincoln's deathbed, as well as items from four other collections from around the country, some of which had never been together since the night Lincoln was assassinated. The exhibit's title shared the title of a book written by Edward Steers about the assassination. (<http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/news/deathbed.htm>)

⁸⁹ *Pilgrimage* was a traveling exhibit from the Smithsonian Institution featuring the work of renowned photographer Annie Leibovitz and shown in the *Illinois Gallery* in 2014.

intent. The original intent was, let's put something in there that isn't about Lincoln or Civil War history and give people another reason to come in, who wouldn't normally come in.

DePue: The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, which we haven't really talked much about, was formerly the Illinois State Historical Library. So the institution, you can make a good argument, possesses and should be promoting the history of the entire state, not just that small window, as important as that window is.

Blanchette: Right.

DePue: So, was there a discussion about portraying other pieces of Illinois history in that temporary exhibit space?

Blanchette: Yes. And I think they have from time to time. Also the walls on the library itself have been used as exhibits, like the Cherry Mine disaster and some other things that have gone here.⁹⁰ And they've done a really good job with that.

DePue: What's your opinion about what that exhibit space should be used for?

Blanchette: I think anything that doesn't deal with Lincoln or the Civil War, unless it's a very important anniversary date. Like I said, there are people who are always going to visit the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum to see Lincoln. There are some people who would never set foot in there, unless there's something in there they want to see.

A good case in point is, during the Lincoln Bicentennial we had the Lincoln Bicentennial custom motorcycle in there, which I had a hand in getting made. And you had leather-clad, chain on belt bikers (laughs) coming in to see that motorcycle, who then toured the museum. These people would never set **foot** in a history museum. But they came in to see that motorcycle, and then they became fans of the museum because, once they were in there they realized, "Oh, my gosh, this is great stuff." It's that kind of philosophy.

We saw how successful the motorcycle was, so we talked about getting a NASCAR [National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing] in there at one point. You can get the NASCAR crowd in, who would come in to see that and then would walk around and see the exhibits. Well, that never came to fruition for one reason or another.

DePue: The vast majority of the exhibits that have been in there have either a very close correlation with Lincoln's story or some kind of a connection with the Lincoln story. So it sounds like that part of it has won the day in most cases.

⁹⁰ The Cherry Mine disaster was a fire in the Cherry, Illinois, coal mine in 1909, and surrounding events, in which 259 men and boys died. The disaster stands as the third most deadly in American coal mining history. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1909_Cherry_Mine_disaster)

Blanchette: That's not in keeping with the intent. That's not the intent that Bob Rogers had; that's not the intent that Richard Norton Smith had.

DePue: And it wouldn't be the preference of Dave Blanchette?

Blanchette: No, because I agree with their philosophy on that. I've seen it when it works well, and I can see the possibilities that are there.

DePue: How about the architectural design of the library and the museum? We've already made the point that the exhibits came first, and then the poor architects are stuck with having to build a box to fit the exhibits in.

Blanchette: Well, the architecture of the library, I don't think that was ever that controversial. The first drawing for the museum, I remember when we unveiled that, when George and Lura Lynn Ryan were in the Old State Capitol and pulled the drape from in front of the drawing. Well, see, we had seen the drawing before we unveiled it publicly, and we knew this probably won't go over very well. It looked like the Football Hall of Fame Museum [in Canton, Ohio] or an homage to Dolly Parton (laughs).



Early architect's rendering of the proposed Presidential Library and Museum complex, with the museum's dome (far left) being the most identifiable feature.

DePue: It's the one that you see when you come into our back office [research and collections] area here.

Blanchette: And we derisively referred to it as Abraham Lincoln D-cup (both laugh). But we kind of knew that that design would not be received well. And it wasn't. So once that was unveiled, the architect literally went back to the drawing board and modified the design somewhat, into the design you see today, which is much more... It complements the nearby library well.

Plus, the color of the stone and the pillars and everything is kind of a complement to the nearby Old State Capitol. So it fits well. It is not an outstanding architectural design, like a Mies van der Rohe house or something

like that.⁹¹ But, still, it's a pleasing addition. It's not a jarring disturbance in downtown Springfield.

DePue: That's not necessarily what architects want to have said about their buildings though.

Blanchette: It is what it is. He designed a building that serves our purpose, and I think it serves it well. It's a pleasing addition to downtown Springfield, but you won't find it in the architectural treasures of the world book.

DePue: What led to the decision to have two buildings rather than one?

Blanchette: The fact that we wanted to place a heavy emphasis on exhibits and be a story-driven type museum. It's easier to tell a story if you have free reign within one building.

DePue: And is there a story about the causeway?

Blanchette: The bridge, the pedestrian bridge? Yeah.

DePue: The bridge.

Blanchette: Initially it was seen as a way to get people from one building to another, encourage cross-pollination between the two buildings. That walkway is very close to where you come out of *Ghosts of the Library*, and the original thought was people are going to come out of *Ghost of the Library* and think, "Isn't the library neat? Let's go see the library." I think at some point there was supposed to be some sort of exhibit on this side, on the library side, so when people came across there they could see something.

DePue: I think what Bob mentioned was that the *Ghosts of the Library* was actually supposed to be in the library.

Blanchette: And that's probably true. But now it's mainly to get artifacts back and forth. They had originally thought that you could maybe have special events on there, like cocktail mixers or something. But it's pretty much just for staff use now. Also, in the windows, to display the latest poster for the latest exhibit.

DePue: From the public relations standpoint, what's the backstory on figuring out where the library and museum would be?

Blanchette: There were several alternatives, one of which was near Lincoln's home, a couple of which were closer to where we were at. It came down to intense discussions with the City of Springfield, as far as what they could offer and what was available, what would put it in closest pedestrian proximity to other things, and what advantages each site had. We had public hearings on the

⁹¹ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was a German-born American architect whose rectilinear forms, crafted in elegant simplicity, epitomized the International Style and exemplified his famous principle that "less is more." (<https://www.dwell.com/article/ludwig-mies-van-der-rohe-architect-19dd30ba>)

issue and got lots of public input on potential locations. I think, all along they had their eye on these particular parcels and were just glad that the public input kind of supported that, and the City of Springfield's commitment kind of supported that, as well.

DePue: Was there TIF [tax increment financing] money that was made available for this?

Blanchette: Yes, TIF was very important. I think it was a \$10 million TIF commitment, if I'm not mistaken.

DePue: Was that strictly for this complex or to beautify the rest of the downtown area, as well?

Blanchette: I'm not sure on the details of that, but I know the city agreed to tear down the old police and fire stations to make way for the museum and had some sort of way that they helped tear down the other buildings that the library is now located on.

DePue: I know that, as the press representative, you were getting lots of questions about what you would expect for the attendance, and how much is that going to increase downtown traffic, and will that help out restaurants downtown, and will that bleed off or reinforce visitation to these other sites? Can you talk a little bit about all of that?

Blanchette: There was a big fear early on that it would take away attendance from the other historic sites. That's why, right there in the gateway of the museum, the last thing you see upon exiting is a map, showing you how to get to the other Lincoln sites. That's why, throughout the museum, it tells you, "Here's where the real thing is." So you can see Lincoln's Tomb; you can see the Old State Capitol. Go see for yourself.

The historic site managers were very nervous that their attendance would drop significantly. We were nervous because we didn't want to hurt the historic sites. We as the Historic Preservation Agency, that's been our bread and butter for decades. We knew we would bring a lot of new people to downtown Springfield. I think the downtown merchants weren't quite so convinced. I don't know why Missouri's the Show me State, I think Illinois ought to be called the Show me State (both laugh).

They took a lot of convincing. There were a few that stepped out on a limb, like the hot dog place right across from the library was a good example. But by and large, I think the merchants knew something good was coming, but they weren't convinced that it would make a difference for them.

The proof was in the pudding, though. Once the place opened, and we got hundreds of thousands of people coming through, and you saw historic site attendance just skyrocket virtually everywhere, that's when it was proven to be valid.

- DePue: Have the restaurants downtown benefited from it?
- Blanchette: I think they have. I don't know how high their expectations were. I think they have benefited, but I don't know if it's been a huge amount.
- DePue: Would it be fair to say that the existence of the library and museum also has coincided with a decrease in a number of state employees that are downtown?
- Blanchette: Yes. It's kind of coincided with that.
- DePue: So maybe it's a wash in that respect.
- Blanchette: Yeah, it might be.
- DePue: We talked about the library and museum. How about the Union Station and the parking ramp, [other parts of the museum and library complex] as well?
- Blanchette: Anytime you plan something in downtown Springfield, you have to take parking into account. We were able to get federal transportation money to help pay for the parking ramps, so that wasn't really as controversial as it could have been, had the state had to foot that bill.

Union Station, that was part of IHPA history. They had gotten it from the Scully family, shortly after I joined the agency. It was initially planned as the first stop in the visitor experience for the presidential library and museum. Then they had to deal with traffic issues, how do you get people across the street from Union Station to the museum? Do you go underground? Do you build another pedestrian bridge? Finally it was decided, "Let's just handle the visitor experience at the front desk of the museum." Then Union Station became what it is today, a showcase for additional exhibits. It's the headquarters of the foundation.

The park out front is used for a lot of special events and just kind of as a place to unwind for people visiting during good weather.

- DePue: Was the Union Station part of the package a harder sell to the public?
- Blanchette: It was already State owned.
- DePue: But there was a big chunk of money that was spent for renovation on it.
- Blanchette: There was. I don't recall it as being that hard a sell. It doesn't stick out in my mind as being a hard sell.
- DePue: One of the things that's in the Union Station now is the foundation [Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation], which was created very early in this process to raise money for it. The money was going to be coming from private citizens and corporations. Any comments to be made about that?
- Blanchette: They're vital to the continued operation of the presidential library and museum. There are some, particularly now, who think they're not doing enough. I am not one of those. I think they're doing a great job, in the face of

people who are trying to undermine their efforts. It's an essential part of virtually any major history museum like this.

DePue: I think the next thing we're going to go into, Dave, is talking about funding for it. Let's start with the federal piece first. Who were the main people behind getting the federal dollars that the library foundation hoped to get?

Blanchette: As I recall, it was Dick Durbin and Ray LaHood and Governor Ryan, Lee Daniels, Julie and Bill Cellini, Dennis Hastert.

DePue: It didn't hurt that he was Speaker of the House at the time.

Blanchette: Didn't hurt at all. Virtually anybody who had any pull in Illinois politics was involved in that.

DePue: In July of 2000, when it looks like we've got \$50 million that are coming to the construction of this new library and museum, that's about the time that the other U.S. senator from Illinois, Peter Fitzgerald, started to have some reservations about the whole thing. I'm sure you got involved with all of that.

Blanchette: My opinion then, as now, is that it was a political grandstand act on his part.

DePue: You need to provide all the details, all the juicy background that you can (Blanchette laughs).

Blanchette: I don't know that there is juicy background. He was looking for rats where there weren't any rats.

DePue: What was his concern?

Blanchette: His concern was that it was political pay back, that some things might have been done underhandedly. Nothing could be further from the truth. The thing was, people had become accustomed to Illinois operating that way, and so they were only too ready to believe the fact that, oh, here's a U.S. senator who used to be a former prosecutor, he's saying something doesn't smell right, so it must not be right.

DePue: What's the something that you're talking about?

Blanchette: I don't know that I ever knew any specifics. I don't think he ever provided any specifics.

DePue: I thought it was that the awarding of contracts for the construction of the building would somehow be tied to the people who had always been influential in Illinois politics.

Blanchette: It was competitively bid. It was an open, competitive bid process. In fact, the press covered every step of the bid and bid awarding process. I still think it was just grandstanding.

DePue: Was Bill Cellini's name dragged into this whole discussion?

Blanchette: Oh, yes, it was dragged in.

DePue: In what respect?

Blanchette: Anytime the press could drag him in, they did, whether it was the *Chicago Tribune*, whether it was Peter Fitzgerald. If they wouldn't come out and say it, then they would intimate that, because he was a Republican power broker, he must have had something to do with this that wasn't quite right. And, in my experience, nothing could be further from the truth. He was a big supporter of this, and he wanted it done right.

DePue: How many questions were you getting from the press about that?

Blanchette: A lot.

DePue: What was your standard answer?

Blanchette: It was an open and competitive bidding process. There was no influence that was used (both laugh). And to the best of my knowledge, that's the truth.

DePue: But by the time this is all going on... We've already mentioned George Ryan. You've already credited both George and Lura Lynn and Bill and Julie Cellini as the forces behind this place getting built.

Blanchette: Correct.

DePue: But by this time also, George Ryan's reputation is quickly sliding into the toilet. Would that be a fair thing to say?

Blanchette: Oh, yes.

DePue: Did that cause you some grief in trying to put the best face on this?

Blanchette: Some. The only time it caused major grief, though, was for the cornerstone dedication ceremony plus the opening ceremony for the presidential library, because his name's on the cornerstone of the presidential library, and he wanted to make sure that his name was on that.

People raised holy hell about that. Here is someone who's under suspicion, chiseling his name into the permanent makeup of this brand new showpiece for Honest Abe. That's kind of what the public reaction was; that's what the press reaction was. Then when we, admittedly, hurried up the opening, the initial opening of the presidential library, so it could occur before his term in office was over—and it proved to be a premature opening because the climate control systems didn't work the way they should—we caught a lot of heat from the press and the public over both of those.

DePue: Deservedly so?

Blanchette: I think so. When I say we, the administration, the Ryan...because, let's face it, as a double-exempt employee who serves at the will of Illinois governors, you

are part of the administration. So, yes, the Ryan administration deservedly got some heat over those two things.

DePue: What were you telling the press when those kinds of questions came in your direction?

Blanchette: As far as the cornerstone, I said the absolute truth, "The Ryans were a major force in getting this from point A to point B, and they deserve to be recognized. And every state building has a cornerstone and has the name of the governor who brought it into being on there." In fact, Rod Blagojevich's [who was impeached and convicted of corruption charges] name is in the museum (both laugh).

But as far as the early opening for the library, nobody knew it was early, except those of us that were involved with it and all the rushing that had to go on at the very last minute to get things ready for the public to go through it. And then, when we found out shortly thereafter, that the climate control systems that we were supposed to get weren't the climate control systems that were put in place, it became obvious that [if] things might have been slowed down some, that maybe some of these problems could have been avoided.

DePue: Who was at fault for the climate control system being bad?

Blanchette: I think the courts finally ruled, in the lawsuit over that, that it was a combination of the architect and the general contractor. At least that's the ones that had to pay for the cost of the fix.

DePue: Who was the general contractor?

Blanchette: Siciliano [Inc., Springfield, Illinois].

DePue: And in fine Springfield tradition it's an Italian name again.

Blanchette: (laughs) It is.

DePue: We mentioned George Ryan here, and you said that, in large part, he deserves a lot of the credit for this facility existing. What exactly did he do to cause it to come about?

Blanchette: He put the weight of his entire administration behind it. Whenever we needed something... Well, typically how it would happen was his wife would find out we needed something, and she would talk to him, and we would get what we needed, whether it was cooperation from other state agencies, whether it was making contact with the general assembly for continued appropriations, whether it was problems with...who knows, street permits to put the pedestrian bridge over Jefferson, things like that. She would talk to him; he would talk to the ones who needed to be talked to, and boom, problem solved or at least on its way to being solved.

They took an intense personal interest. Whenever we would see them, whether it was for this or anything else, it was always, "Well, how's this going

or how's that going?" They took an intense interest. You would only find out later on that those informal conversations, something you might mention to the governor or Mrs. Ryan in those informal conversations... A few weeks later you'd hear from someone who said, "Oh, Governor Ryan called me the other day and said we needed to do this and this and this." You realized what you put in their ear set something in motion.

DePue: How would you characterize your personal relationship with Ryan?

Blanchette: Good, but let me tell you a little story that illustrates that. I came to realize it much closer than I knew, much later on. A few months before the presidential library opened in 2002, my wife was involved in an accident, which was extremely serious, almost killed her. She's had nineteen surgeries since then. She's permanently disabled because of it. Early on in that process, because her injuries required so much specialized care and surgery, there were a lot of times when the surgeons didn't quite know what to do, didn't quite know how to handle it. At one point we were having difficulty getting surgeries scheduled then canceled, getting it scheduled and canceled because they didn't have the right equipment or whatever.

Mrs. Ryan, who shortly after my wife had the accident actually went up to visit and left a teddy bear, signed her name on it, because my wife was unconscious, she just happened to say, "How's your wife doing?" I said, "Oh, we're having a lot of trouble with this particular hospital. We've had two surgeries scheduled. They've been canceled. We just don't know what to do." The very next night I get a call from the president of SIU Medical School, (laughs) saying, "We've decided to appoint an ombudsman for you and your wife for the duration of her care at our facility. We want you to check in, and we're going to make sure that everything is absolutely right. Any problems that arise, and these surgeries, we will schedule them, and they will go off as planned." I said, "Well, thank you very much. I didn't really need that, but thank you very much."

A couple days after that, I ran into Mrs. Ryan. She said, "Well, did George's call to the president of SIU Medical School make a difference?" (both laugh) I said, "Boy, did it." So he, on his own, without me asking him, decided these people have suffered enough, I'm going to take care of this. And he didn't even tell me that he was doing that.

DePue: Ryan has a reputation for wanting to make deals, wanting to get things done. He certainly was able to do that as governor because he's got... Illinois First, I think that was his big project, as well, his public works project. Do you think his interest in this institution was to burnish his legacy, or was it just a sincere interest in Abraham Lincoln?

Blanchette: Little bit of both. Let's be honest. Every governor wants to burnish his legacy. But I think there was also a sincere interest in Lincoln and a sincere interest to do something good for Illinois. But, yes, it was also political.

DePue: How much did the City of Springfield contribute to all of this?

Blanchette: I think it was \$10 million in TIF, if I'm not mistaken, plus they donated the land upon which both buildings sit, and they did some demolition work. There were some other things that they put in. You add it up, and it was a significant contribution. We couldn't have done it without their input. And Karen Hasara [Springfield mayor, 1995-2003] was very instrumental in getting that. And then Tim Davlin [Springfield mayor, 2003-2010] also kind of carried that forward, and we were able to get what we needed from his administration as well. But it was Karen Hasara who got the bulk of it.

DePue: I keep running into these names that have an interesting history in their own right here.

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: How about private donations? I know that both Julie Cellini and Susan Mogerman were much more involved; that was kind of their role. Was that an important piece, and were you involved with that?

Blanchette: I was not involved with it. I was only involved when we got the donations, and I would publicize them. But my understanding was it was very important, especially early on, because we needed to demonstrate there was a public donation commitment component there, in order to mollify the congressional delegation and all the millions they were earmarking towards this particular project.

DePue: The way this process worked, as I understand it, is the construction had already started, the exhibit design was already well under way before all of the money was procured.

Blanchette: Correct.

DePue: Is that typical?

Blanchette: No (laughs). We were taking a risk. Well, the State of Illinois was taking a risk.

DePue: Who in particular was sticking their neck out on all of that?

Blanchette: The administration, the Ryan administration. You just said it, and we said it numerous times; he was a deal maker. Undoubtedly, he had had some sort of deal worked out with the legislative leaders, that they would promise to deliver for him, or else he wouldn't have taken that risk.

DePue: I think, from the Capital Development Board, it was a figure of over \$100 million. And then there's IDOT road funds and IDOT non-road funds. So the State of Illinois is into this in a big way, and that's during a time—now we're into the early 2000s—when the economy is quite a bit tighter than it was in the heydays of the late '90s.

Blanchette: Um-hmm.

DePue: Do you have any sense of what it took for Ryan to get that level of financial commitment?

Blanchette: I don't know what kind of arms he had to twist, but he did.

DePue: And they weren't coming to you asking questions about that?

Blanchette: No.

DePue: The press wasn't?

Blanchette: No.

DePue: Were they going to the Governor's Office?

Blanchette: Well, there weren't many questions, as I recall, because we would publicize when we got a major donation or when the congressional delegation would come for... It just didn't seem like it was that big a press issue. Yes, the price tag was always an issue, but not how we were getting the money. That wasn't a big issue.

DePue: Now, the press—I don't need to tell you—the press is supposed to be objective, non-biased, but to a certain extent it sounds to me like the press were onboard with this, the concept of having a presidential library and museum, that they were onboard with this, that they were more forgiving in some respects.

Blanchette: They were, and I had a real good relationship that I developed over the years with them and also something we did... When the museum was about half-completed, we had a press tour, but it was not like other press tours. For this press tour, the members of the press were the tour guides, and the general public was the visitors. I handpicked which press would be in each area, but then they would have to learn about their area to be conversant enough to tell the visiting public—who were coming through in hard hats because it was still a construction zone—"Okay, here's this empty room, but here's what's going to be in this empty room." It was just a shell; there were no exhibits up or anything. Here you have reporters who were in there, telling the general public, "This is the great thing that's going to be in this museum."

Because we brought the press on board—and there were several other things we did too—this was probably one of the greatest things we did for media relations for that. From then on the press, with a few exceptions, like Ray Long—he didn't do that, and he never would—they always remember that. To this day, I'll run into those people and they'll say, "Oh, yeah, I remember when I was a tour guide on the hard hat tour."

DePue: Doesn't that cross the line of objectivity though?

Blanchette: Oh, gosh, yes. Of course it does (both laugh).

DePue: And they didn't mind doing that?

Blanchette: Didn't mind it.

DePue: Whose idea was that?

Blanchette: That was mine.

DePue: I can see how that plays to your advantage in the long run (Blanchette laughs).

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: I've got a lot more to talk about here. But since we're talking dollar figures, did the public, the State of Illinois, did Lincoln, did Springfield get its money's worth out of this?

Blanchette: Definitely. Without question. In visitation alone... Forget reputation; forget international significance for the moment. In purely raw number of visitors who have come in and made an economic impact in the city of Springfield and Central Illinois, yes. Everything else is gravy on top of that. And we have a lot of gravy.

DePue: There was absolutely no hesitation in your voice in answering that question.

Blanchette: None, none whatsoever.

DePue: Let's kind of walk through the construction phase of this. As I understand, February 12, 2001 is the groundbreaking for the ALPLM [Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum], but I assume that's strictly the groundbreaking for the library at that point in time.

Blanchette: As I recall, that's correct.

DePue: Do you remember that day at all?

Blanchette: Yeah, they were standing in the middle of a parking lot.

DePue: "They" being?

Blanchette: Governor and other dignitaries. And it was a nice sunny day, kind of chilly. I just remember it being kind of a great occasion. Everybody felt good. Nothing else really stands out in my mind.

DePue: You already mentioned the contractors. Who were some of the subcontractors involved with building the library and museum?

Blanchette: Oh, my. Hanson Engineers was one. There was a local plumbing and heating firm [R. J. Power Plumbing and Heating Co., Inc.], a local electrical firm [Egizii Electric Inc.]. I can't even think of the names right now.

DePue: Why did the library come first?

Blanchette: Wanted to safeguard the collection. They wanted to make sure that the 12 million item collection of the Illinois State Historical Library was secure, that it had a nice new home before they built the place with the exhibits.

DePue: That's kind of where this whole thing started, isn't it?

Blanchette: Right.

DePue: And one of the things—I don't know if this was controversial at all—is the Egyptian marble that's featured in the building, right?

Blanchette: Egyptian limestone.

DePue: Egyptian limestone. Any blowback because of that decision?

Blanchette: No. And they didn't require that it be Egyptian. They just required certain things of the stone that would be cladding the building, and a quarry in Egypt happened to meet all of those specifications. The architect didn't say it has to be Egyptian. [He] just said it has to be limestone, has to be this density, has to be this, this, and this. A place in Egypt had that.

DePue: You've already mentioned this quite a bit, the laying of the cornerstone for the library, June 10, 2002. Any other comments about that day? That would have been at the tail end of the Ryan Administration.

Blanchette: Yeah. The press covered that, half to get the cornerstone but also half to shout questions at George Ryan about ongoing investigations of his administration. I remember dealing with his press people and setting this up, saying, "We will absolutely not make him available for the press. We're here for the cornerstone. Let's stay on target, stay on message. We're not going to let that other thing put a shadow over the event."

Well, it did anyway because every story about it was saying, "Governor Ryan, currently under investigation, laid a cornerstone" (laughs). Then they would interview people saying, "Well, he shouldn't have done this. His name's going to be chiseled on this building."

DePue: I'm trying to envision this, the laying of the cornerstone. Is there even a shell of a building at the time? Was it mostly completed?

Blanchette: Oh, yeah. The building was almost done, and there was just a space for it. So it wasn't really a laying of the cornerstone. It was really kind of a dedication of the cornerstone. Really they just kind of pulled the wraps off of the block that had been chiseled.

DePue: And it was after this that the whole issue of the HVAC [heating, ventilation, and air conditioning] problem came to light?

Blanchette: Yeah, a couple months later we had the grand opening, the "grand" opening. I think that was in November, might have been shortly after the election. But that's when the issue came to light; [it] was several months after that.

- DePue: Walk me through the timeline. One of the things that has to occur before the grand opening, I would believe, is the transfer of all of the items, the books, the artifacts, the papers, everything.
- Blanchette: They hadn't done that yet. The reason they didn't do it is because they were having an open house with the grand opening of the library. That meant a lot of people coming in and out of the building, so that would make your temperature and humidity levels fluctuate. They wanted to make sure that the bulk of the collection wasn't in yet, in case there was a problem with that influx of people. So, luckily, not a lot of the collection, if any, had been moved over by then.
- DePue: How big an issue did it become?
- Blanchette: Huge.
- DePue: Give us some understanding of that.
- Blanchette: You had a grand opening of this facility that had such high hopes pinned on it for so many years, and then within weeks after that, you have to come out with the news that, "Oops, it wasn't really a grand opening after all. We've got this major problem that we're going to have to fix before it can even be used, before we can even make sure the collections are safe. And oh, by the way, it looks like some shady dealings were going on in some way or another." So it was a huge problem, a huge PR nightmare that went on for quite some time.
- DePue: Shady dealings. What were the suspicions about that?
- Blanchette: That the climate control systems we ordered for the building were not the systems that were installed.
- DePue: Somebody was trying to pull the wool over the State of Illinois' eye?
- Blanchette: Someone was trying to cut corners.
- DePue: "Somebody" being?
- Blanchette: I don't think that it was ever proven who the "somebody" was. All I can...
- DePue: There must have been allegations at the time.
- Blanchette: Yeah. All I can say is that, in the outcome, it ended up being the architect and the contractor who ended up footing the bill, the majority of the bill, for what needed to be done to fix it.
- DePue: What names were appearing in the press as possible suspects?
- Blanchette: Well, the architect and the contractor. So, Siciliano and HOK were the two bandied about most. And there were never any criminal charges brought. It was all settled civilly.
- DePue: Who was catching most of the heat because of this delay?

Blanchette: Probably... Well, by then Ryan was out of office, so it would have been...

DePue: This is happening in 2003?

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: Well, it would have started in 2002.

Blanchette: Yeah. It happened just as he was going out of office. So the bulk of it was during the Blagojevich administration. I don't recall who was catching it. It just seemed like we were always under pressure for that issue.

DePue: Help me understand this part too. The IHPA would have been overseeing the project, but would it have more likely been CDB [Capital Development Board] really involved with the construction phase?

Blanchette: Capital Development Board took a lot of heat on that.

DePue: And that would be rightfully so? That's where they should be in the lead on the project?

Blanchette: Yeah, they are the stage agency that oversees all state funded construction projects. So, yes, they were taking some heat for it.

DePue: When did the library actually open then?

Blanchette: If I'm not mistaken, it was 2004. Does that sound about right?

DePue: Yeah, I should have that on my timeline here. We can revisit that in a little bit. When did the museum construction begin? Was this going on simultaneously?

Blanchette: It was for a time, yeah. I don't recall the exact year that construction on that building began. I know when it opened, April 19, 2005.

DePue: Now we get to another one of the, I think, areas where you probably were involved more than you might wanted to have been. That is selection of the new director, the director of this new library/museum for America's most important historical figure.

Blanchette: I was not involved in the selection, but I was involved when he would make a site visit or when his appointed representative, Erik Nelson, would make site visits. I would have to show them around and familiarize them with the construction site and what was going in what areas.

DePue: You're talking about Richard Norton Smith.

Blanchette: Richard Norton Smith.

DePue: But I want to get into all of that that occurred before Richard Norton Smith was identified.

Blanchette: Oh, yeah. Governor Ryan wanted to name his chief-of-state, Bob Newton, as the first director of the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. That was

something that we... By we, I mean the IHPA and Cellinis and people on the committee. They were just dead-set against that. They wanted a world class scholar, a presidential scholar, someone with big name recognition to be it, not, let's face it, a political flunky.

DePue: What was the relationship between Newton and Ryan?

Blanchette: As I understand it, it's pretty close. I mean, you don't have a chief-of-staff that you're not close to.

DePue: I thought I'd heard that they were even boyhood friends; they grew up together.

Blanchette: I don't know anything about that. But it involved a lot of closed door meetings, and I remember being in some of those at the Cellini's house, where this was discussed, "How do we stop this from happening? How do we get the right person in and not someone who doesn't belong there?"

We found this out later on—we didn't know this at the time—but Steve Neal, a *Sun-Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, columnist broke the story about Newton being considered, and then all the reasons why this would be a wrong thing. I think that being in the public eye is what ultimately stopped that from happening. It turns out... We found out later on, that Richard Norton Smith knew Steve Neal, and Richard Norton Smith, who was up for consideration for director, called his friend Steve Neal and said, "Hey, you ought to know about this thing that's going on." (laughs) So it was Richard Norton Smith who actually was able to stop Bob Newton from being named the director.

DePue: I hadn't heard that one before either. So he's out of the picture. I understood that there was then some discussion about perhaps the University of Illinois, perhaps UIS [University of Illinois Springfield] should be in the lead in controlling and having some voice in that as well. Is that a separate issue, or is that all part of the same issue, as you understand it?

Blanchette: I think that was part of the mix in the discussions. I wasn't really heavily involved in those discussions, so I'm not very well versed in those.

DePue: In May of 2002, Susan Mogerman resigned as director of IHPA. Do you know any of the background on that?

Blanchette: Yeah. She was never a favorite of the Ryan administration anyway. I think the Ryans blamed her for a lot of the backlash of the Bob Newton affair. Whenever a director resigns, and it's not a resignation to take a better job, there's always a backstory. And this is one of them. She was forced out; there is no question about it. And I think it was due to the Bob Newton situation. Even though our meetings behind the scenes—Susan and me and the Cellinis and a couple of other people at the agency were meeting a lot on this—somehow they found out that she was in on that, and I'm almost certain that that had a play in her being forced out.

- DePue: Who in the IHPA staff was closest to the Ryan administration? Was it...
- Blanchette: Maynard Crossland was, and he became the next director.
- DePue: But wouldn't you be one of those people as well, or did he...
- Blanchette: I never even gave it a thought about being director. I was happy with what I was doing.
- DePue: I guess my question is, I would think that, if anybody has a chance to convey a message from IHPA to the governor's office, you would have as good a chance as anybody.
- Blanchette: Probably.
- DePue: Did you convey the concern they had about Bob Newton coming down to IHPA?
- Blanchette: No. Not to the administration I didn't, no.
- DePue: Who was conveying that message?
- Blanchette: I don't know.
- DePue: I wonder if it was the Cellinis.
- Blanchette: It might have been.
- DePue: They obviously were hearing from somebody though. How do you affect Newton not becoming the director, without having somebody pass that back to the administration?
- Blanchette: I don't know how those... If there were discussions like that, I don't know.
- DePue: Let's see, the timeframe here would have been 2001, 2002?
- Blanchette: Sounds about right.
- DePue: And Ryan had problems of his own by that time?
- Blanchette: Sure did.
- DePue: Sorry to keep pressing this. What did you think of Maynard Crossland as the new director?
- Blanchette: Well, I'd always been close to Maynard Crossland because he was my division manager. I knew that he was a good friend of Lura Lynn Ryan and knew George Ryan very well. I thought, Well, if Susan's not going to be the director... And I just dearly loved Susan, great director. But I thought, If she's not going to be the director, I guess he's a good person to take over.
- DePue: Isn't that an awkward time for a change? You've got a governor who's clearly on his way out. Typically there's going to be a decision made by the new

governor for a new head of all of the different agencies. Did that reduce some momentum in the construction of the library/museum?

Blanchette: Didn't skip a beat, as far as momentum on construction. It just kept going. And Maynard was a part of that core group anyway, so he knew all that was going on. So he didn't have to be brought up to speed.

DePue: How well did he do in that role?

Blanchette: I think he did well. I don't think he had the same connections that Susan did. I think Susan and Julie Cellini kind of were kindred spirits in that they had the same kind of outlook, same kind of...were able to talk to the same kind of people in the same kind of way. I don't think... Maynard, he was just a different type of personality altogether. But he brought different strengths to the table.

DePue: Of all the people that I hear credited for the library and museum's existence, you've mentioned all of them already, Bob Rogers and his role in doing that, Gyo Obata and that architectural firm. But of the people here, you've got the Cellinis; you've got Susan Mogerman; you've got Tom Schwartz; you've got the Ryans, in terms of the political clout to get that done, and all of the people beforehand. The name that hasn't come up is Maynard Crossland. Why has he not been given credit for the creation of the library and museum?

Blanchette: I think he was doing yeoman's work up until that point, and then he was thrust into the director's role, and all of a sudden he had to take a lead role. He was part of the core group, always was. But he wasn't kind of in a leadership role of the core group. Then, all of a sudden, as agency director, he was in a leadership role.

DePue: Bob Coomer is the other name I left out of there; I should not have left out. He's oftentimes also given credit for having a big role in it.

Blanchette: Yeah, and justifiably so. Again, he was part of the core group as well. And then when he became director later on... If I'm not mistaken, the museum opened under his directorship.

DePue: But I guess it takes me back to my original question. Why has Crossland's role been downplayed?

Blanchette: I do not know. I don't think it should be.

DePue: Fair enough. I've already asked you a little bit about this. But there was a discussion about the governance over the library and museum. I'll just throw out the three options I've heard. That, one, it's controlled under IHPA as part of the State of Illinois. Two, that it be something that was controlled through one of the university systems in UIS, that it's governance would be going through that channel or, [three], that it possibly would be part of the NARA system, the National Archives and Records Administration, which was responsible for all the other presidential library museums.

Blanchette: The NARA was ruled out earlier on because, they would have to change federal legislation, for one. But I think the State wanted to maintain as much control over it as they could.

Now, it ended up being under IHPA for a couple of reasons, the main one of which was, we were trying to attract someone like Richard Norton Smith to be the first executive director. And the only way to do that would be to give that person some autonomy or a great deal of autonomy.

So they set up this deliberately nebulous reporting structure, where you have the head of the IHPA, and you've got the head of the ALPLM, and there are kind of these—you know how a lot of org structures have these direct lines, this person reports—well, there are these dotted lines (laughs), a lot of these dotted lines between these two heads, like who reports to the board, directly to the board? Who reports through whom? It was deliberately kept very loosey-goosey because they were afraid that someone like Richard Norton Smith wouldn't take the position if he knew he would have to report to someone else, rather than be able to report directly to the board.

Now, that worked in getting Richard Norton Smith here. But after that, it presented problems with every subsequent director because there was that nebulous relationship, and we have seen that cause problems all the way down the road.

DePue: Interesting. So, to make sure I understand this correctly, you've got the IHPA, with an executive director, appointed by the governor?

Blanchette: Appointed by the board, but they always take who the governor recommends.

DePue: The board being the Board of Trustees?

Blanchette: IHPA, yes.

DePue: Which is not just an advisory board.

Blanchette: No, it's a policy making board.

DePue: A governing board. And then you've got the director of the library/museum, who is selected by?

Blanchette: Officially by the IHPA board, with the recommendation of the governor.

DePue: So the same relationship for those two people.

Blanchette: Right.

DePue: What you're describing is—as they designed this—the relationship between the IHPA director and the library/museum director was...

Blanchette: Realistically, equals. The way it was set up, the ALPLM director was supposed to go through the IHPA director for certain things: personnel, budgeting, that sort of thing, official reporting to the board. In practice,

though, because the structure was so loosey-goosey, the ALPLM director could pretty much do what he wanted. He would still need to go through the IHPA for budgetary matters and personnel matters, but he pretty much had free reign, and everybody knew it.

DePue: And this is an issue that's embedded in the legislation, I would assume.

Blanchette: It is. And that has been the source of subsequent problems with every director since then.

DePue: It sounds to me like, from your perspective, there wasn't really that much debate about NARA or even the University of Illinois Springfield.

Blanchette: There was a lot of discussion about University of Illinois Springfield, but it was ruled out, and I'm not sure exactly why. I'm sure it had to do partially with attracting the right person for the first executive directorship, I suspect. I don't know that for a fact.

DePue: One of the names I have heard as a potential candidate to lead the institution—my understanding is it came up even before Richard Norton Smith, or maybe as a likely candidate—was Harold Holzer.

Blanchette: Yes, that name was brought up.

DePue: Was that before Richard was part of the picture?

Blanchette: I think so.

DePue: You don't know the background to that?

Blanchette: I don't know the background. I don't know why he refused it, or even if he was offered; I don't know. But, yes, I remember that, him being someone's choice early on.

DePue: Who was really involved in the controlling aspects of selecting that person? Would that be Julie and the board?

Blanchette: It would be the board, with Julie as the chair, but also the Governor's Office.

DePue: How about Tom Schwarz? Would he be intimately involved with that selection as well?

Blanchette: I don't think so. He would have known about it, but I don't think he would have had a decision-making role in that.

DePue: By this time in the whole sequence of events, you've got a new [democratic] governor, Rod Blagojevich.

Blanchette: Right.

DePue: Do you retain your job?

Blanchette: I retained my job, yes.

DePue: A different governor from a different party, was that ever an issue for you?

Blanchette: It was because one of the early things he did in his administration was... He wanted to consolidate all of the information officers in state government and move us to the Department of Central Management Services. Early on in that process, he had someone who was to be in charge of that operation, named Mary Beth Johnson.

She was sent to each of the agencies. Those information officers that weren't fired outright by the incoming governor, she would then go and meet with those information officers and their current directors and kind of determine, is this someone we want to keep, or is this someone we want to get rid of?

Well, she came to Maynard's office—I remember this distinctly—and she was in there; it was Maynard, me, and Mary Beth Johnson in the office. She laid out the Blagojevich administration's plan for consolidating the officers, moving us all to the Stratton Building, putting us directly under the thumb of the Governor's Office, having us deal remotely with our agencies.

I said, "That's the dumbest idea I've ever heard." (laughs) She said, "Well, you'd better start to like it because we're taking you." And Maynard said, "No, you're not. I want to keep him. It makes no sense to have him over in the Stratton Building when we've got this museum about to open. We're going to have worldwide press here. We're going to have a president possibly. This makes no sense whatsoever." And she said, "It doesn't matter. It's going to happen."

I guess Maynard called the Governor's Office and said, "Look, this is ridiculous. We can't have this happen." And he was basically told, "Oh, it's going to happen." And it happened. So they moved me to the Stratton Building, and I had to deal with most of everything leading up to the opening of the presidential museum remotely, from the Stratton Building.

DePue: I wasn't aware of that either. When did you get back here then?

Blanchette: After they saw how poorly (laughs) that whole system was operating, some of the public information officers... You're supposed to maintain a temporary office in your agency anyway. Well, a lot of us were spending more time at the temporary office than the permanent office in the Stratton. It got to be the case with me, where I was spending nine-tenths of my time in my temporary office, back at the agency. So they kind of turned a blind eye toward that, and then eventually, by osmosis, you saw a lot of people migrating back into the agency.

DePue: So nobody liked it any better than you did?

Blanchette: Nobody like it. The only one that liked it was the governor and his chief-of-staff, who thought it was a great idea. It was a terrible idea.

DePue: His chief of...

Blanchette: The only thing that it was good for was to help the governor publicize the governor. His chief-of-staff was Bradley Tusk.

DePue: Beyond all of that, what was your relationship with the new administration?

Blanchette: Not good. But they didn't get along with very many people. They valued what I did. I would get very good reviews for what I did. I was a good soldier. I did what I was supposed to for the administration. But they didn't get along well with a whole lot of people.

DePue: Did you have any direct dealings with Governor Blagojevich?

Blanchette: Very, very few.

DePue: Any stories that you can tell in that regard?

Blanchette: Only when he and his wife were together, I would be witness, behind the scenes, to them swearing at each other and using foul language and calling each other every name in the book. I'm thinking to myself, "This is the Governor of Illinois, and he and his wife are talking like a bunch of drunken sailors (laughs).

DePue: Well, George Ryan had a reputation of occasionally having colorful language, but I would assume, in the relationship between George and Lura Lynn, that was not the case?

Blanchette: A very loving relationship. You could tell that they were lifelong devoted to each other.

DePue: Did you see any occasions where George Ryan's personality would be different in his dealing with other people?

Blanchette: Gruff, usually. If things weren't going right, he'd let loose with some language. He's a choir boy compared to Blagojevich.

DePue: (laughs) That doesn't say much for Blagojevich.

Blanchette: No.

DePue: How about Richard Norton Smith? He was appointed in October of 2003. Were you looking forward to having somebody finally in charge of the library/museum?

Blanchette: Yes. And I had met with him a couple of times, informally, to help give him tours or what have you. I knew of his national reputation, and everybody was excited about him coming on board. He was full of great ideas. He had been through it. He knew what to do, and I was greatly looking forward to working with him.

DePue: What was his background?

Blanchette: He had run a number of presidential libraries, and he was a nationally known and often quoted—in-the-media expert on presidential history.

DePue: My understanding is most of the presidential libraries he had been at were for Republican presidents?

Blanchette: Yeah (laughs). It was a joke that Blagojevich, I think, either when we opened this or before, he said publicly, "We've got to have you run a museum for a Democrat someday." (both laugh) But, yeah, as far as I know, they were all Republican.

DePue: Your first impressions of the man [Smith]?

Blanchette: First impressions were very good. He knew his stuff. He didn't beat around the bush. He knew how to get things done. He knew who to call to get publicity. He knew who to call to get support. And I thought, "Prayers have been answered. This is the right guy to open this place and get it running."

DePue: How would you describe his personality, once you got to know him better?

Blanchette: As I got to know him better, absolutely ruthless, had a tendency to be backstabbing, very, very vain, wanted to make sure that he got credit for virtually everything. [He] did not tolerate people who didn't see or do things his way, so conflicts between us were inevitable.

DePue: Should we let them play out, or do you want to share a couple stories here to begin with?

Blanchette: I'll tell one story, and it'll lead into the true falling out that we had. During this entire development process for this facility, I was given free rein to have press in whenever I wanted because it was great publicity for this place. And I had set up to have the local weathercaster, Gus Gordon, from channel twenty [WICS Newschannel 20, Springfield], come and do his weather from the presidential library one night.

He had his crew all set up, and he was getting ready to do the weather. And Erik Nelson, who was Richard Norton Smith's chief-of-staff—who he brought with him from another presidential library—came down the stairs and just shouted, "What's going on here? I didn't authorize this! What's going on?" And he started swearing. I said, "Erik, he's about ready to go on the air. Can we kind of calm it down?" He would not stop; he just kept on and on.

Here's Gus Gordon and his crew looking like, "We can't go on the air with this guy cussing." So they had to put off doing the weather, had to put it off, put it off, put it off. Finally I just got so upset with Erik, and I said, "Erik, go fuck yourself. Get out of here." He says, "Richard's going to hear about this." So he ran upstairs.

Then I told Gus, I said, "Okay, do your weather now. Do it now, before he comes back." So they did the weather (laughs), got it done, got out of there. They couldn't get out of there quickly enough. Sure enough, Richard

Norton Smith came down, and he says, "I want to talk to you." In no uncertain terms, he made me aware that I had been out of line, that Erik is his representative, that when I talk that way to Erik I talk that way to him, and this will not be tolerated in any facility that he operates.

Shortly thereafter, I was informed that Richard Norton Smith had gotten the administration to let him hire his own public information officer, just for the presidential library and museum, that I would still do overall IHPA stuff. The person who was the spokesman for the library/museum would still report to me, but that Richard's daily dealings with the press would be from a person that he brought on of his own choosing. So that was how he dealt with my "insubordination."

DePue: So you were kind of frozen out of this project that you'd been hip deep in.

Blanchette: Frozen out of it. I ended up being in on it on a day-to-day basis anyway because we were planning this huge opening ceremony, and I had to coordinate a good deal of that. But the person he brought on, luckily, was very sharp. Her name was Christine Glunz, who had had experience...

DePue: Christine?

Blanchette: Christine Glunz, G-l-u-n-z. She had had experience with presidential level visits. I think she had worked with the Clinton White House on some things. So she was very, very good at what she did, very good sense about her. But the fact still remained, she was brought on because Richard and I had open conflict.

DePue: You said that he had brought this Erik Nelson with him?

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: What was the relationship between those two men?

Blanchette: They had a close working relationship, and I understand they had a close personal relationship as well.

DePue: Is it true that Richard didn't drive himself, that Erik would typically be the driver for him?

Blanchette: That's correct. I do know that Erik was kind of like his attack dog. Whenever Richard had something that he didn't want to do or that involved nastiness, he would send Erik to do it. And the construction crews, Erik for some reason was always berating the construction crews, like, "This is too messy," or "This doesn't look right," or "This is too noisy," or whatever. They came to derisively call him "Buckle Boy" because the shoes he wore always had buckles, a very stylish slip-on buckle. They called him Buckle Boy (laughs).

DePue: As constructions workers, were there...

Blanchette: Like, "Here comes Buckle Boy again." (both laugh)

DePue: What was Smith's relationship with the Cellinis?

Blanchette: I think it was good because he knew it had to be. He realized that they were the power behind the throne. So I think it was good because it had to be.

DePue: Maybe this was a provision in the law, but he also became the chair of the foundation?

Blanchette: Right. He operated that way, and Rick Beard, the next executive director, had that. But I think they wisely separated that afterward. I think it was good for the opening because it's one cohesive... Here's one person that you can go to, a one-stop shop to get this place up and operating. But I think it should have been split off after that.

DePue: I know that when Susan left the job as the IHPA director, she went over to the foundation. I think there was a step in between, the City Tourism Department, and then she went over to the foundation.

Blanchette: Right.

DePue: Are you privy to friction between her and Richard?

Blanchette: I am not. I don't recall that specifically.

DePue: We've been at this for more than two hours. I saw you checking your watch, so maybe it's time to take a break. I appreciate it. It's been very enlightening, and we've got a lot more to go, Dave.

Blanchette: Okay.

DePue: Any final comments for today?

Blanchette: I think we're done.

(end of transcript #2)

Interview with David Blanchette

HP-A-L-2015-023.03

Interview # 3: August 5, 2015

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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A Note to the Reader

This transcript is based on an interview recorded by the ALPL Oral History Program. Readers are reminded that the interview of record is the original video or audio file, and are encouraged to listen to portions of the original recording to get a better sense of the interviewee's personality and state of mind. The interview has been transcribed in near-verbatim format, then edited for clarity and readability, and reviewed by the interviewee. For many interviews, the ALPL Oral History Program retains substantial files with further information about the interviewee and the interview itself. Please contact us for information about accessing these materials.

DePue: Today is Wednesday, August 5, 2015. This is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm with David Blanchette, who's heard me say that twice before. Good morning, Dave.

Blanchette: Yeah. It's so redundant, but... (laughs)

DePue: Well, I always start that way, so we know when and where these things occur.

Blanchette: It's called tradition.

DePue: It's all part of the processing procedure we go through. We've had two fascinating sessions about these institutions, the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency and Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. Today I hope that we can finish it up, but there's a lot to talk about because you were involved in many of the inside discussions and obviously the public face of the institution as well.

Let's start with this one; it's kind of a housecleaning. We've covered through the early 2000s, but I wanted to ask you about a situation that

involved the Lincoln Academy [of Illinois] and Governor Ryan and a couple of individuals.⁹²

Blanchette: Lincoln Academy is a very prestigious institution, filled with members appointed by the sitting Illinois governor. And whoever the Illinois governor is, [he/she] is president of the academy. What they do is, they honor the best from Illinois, whether they were born in Illinois or achieved their fame in Illinois. They have a convocation every year to honor these people. They've honored people like Charlton Heston [actor] and Walter Payton [professional football player] and famous scientists, Nobel laureates, authors. It's a who's who list of anyone with an Illinois connection. A year or so ago it was Hillary Rodham Clinton [politician], for instance, Jim Lovell [astronaut], just some examples.

During the last several months of the George Ryan administration, when he was under a cloud of suspicion for what he would ultimately be convicted for later on, he was trying to create a legacy for himself. Past practice had always been that the sitting Illinois governor, once he is out of office, a couple of years later, the Lincoln Academy would make that person a laureate of the Lincoln Academy, because a governor is a very important figure in Illinois history. Jim Thompson is a laureate of the Lincoln Academy, for instance.

Ryan was afraid that they wouldn't do that because of the impending court case surrounding him and the controversy swirling about. So he got the idea—I don't know who gave it to him, possibly his chief-of-staff Bob Newton, possibly somebody else—that he was going to appoint all new members or enough new members to the Lincoln Academy, replacing other members, to ensure that if a vote came up, that they would recommend that he be a laureate of the Lincoln Academy.

This absolutely did not sit well whatsoever with the Lincoln Academy. And I was brought into discussions with the coordinator of the Lincoln Academy, Judy Bartoff at that time, and the chancellor of the Lincoln Academy at that time, John Simon, who is now a federal judge. We had some very quiet but very animated discussions about what we could do to keep this from happening. If you kind of shanghaied the Lincoln Academy like this and forced them to vote for someone who they didn't really want to vote for, it would cast a cloud of suspicion on the academy. So...

DePue: I want to make sure I understand. The “this,” that you want to make sure doesn't happen was the replacement of all these board members or George Ryan selected as one of the laureates or both?

⁹² Lincoln Academy is a not-for-profit and non-partisan organization dedicated to recognizing contributions made by Illinoisans. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TheLincolnAcademyofIllinois>)[p](#)

Blanchette: One would lead to the other. They did not want to have the board members replaced because they knew what it was going to lead to. Rather than go public with this... You see, going public worked with the previous thing we talked about, with George Ryan and Bob Newton. They brought Steve Neal into the discussion; he made it public, and then it died. This is something they didn't want to make public. So it was decided that we would talk to as many high-up people as we could think of, to keep this from happening.

I spoke with several editors of some high-placed newspapers in Illinois, just very off-the-record conversations saying, in general terms, "I may have something coming up here that we may need to bring to your attention on very short notice. Here are some general ideas about what I'm talking about, but I can't be very specific." And John Simon made his contacts, and Judy Bartoff made her contacts.

DePue: Were these all to the media or to...

Blanchette: No, no. Mine were to the media, to very high-placed editors, like the [*Chicago*] *Tribune* and *Journal-Register* [Springfield paper] and places like that. I don't know who they were contacting. We deliberately kept things as compartmentalized as possible because we were afraid if word got out about this... We were trying to head off the governor (laughs), who was our boss. This could have serious repercussions. It ended up working. I don't know what part of it made it work, but I suspect it was probably John Simon's connections because he was very, very connected with people in both political parties, both in the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois and nationally. But this didn't happen. And thankfully it didn't because the academy continues to thrive and continues to recognize those who deserve to be recognized.

Now, make no bones about it, George Ryan deserves to be recognized for what he did for the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, no question about it. And he deserves to be recognized for his stance on the death penalty, agree with him or not agree with him, he deserves to be recognized for some things that he did. But he deserves to be recognized in a natural way, not by shanghaiing the group that honors Illinois's most prestigious citizens, either by birth or accomplishment.

Anyway, that was another thing that (laughs) happened during those tumultuous last months of the Ryan administration. And I tell you, dealing with that administration the first three-and-a-half years and then dealing with them the last six months, [was a] completely different way of dealing. It was a total siege, fortress mentality those last six months. We were getting nothing out of them. The press was getting nothing out of them. They just walled themselves in. It was just a very strange situation. We saw that repeated during the last weeks of the Blagojevich administration as well, while the boss was being put on public show trial. As far as the administration was concerned, very little of substance was getting done.

- DePue: Let's go back to maybe a happier subject. We talked last time about the construction, the design, the development of all of the exhibits for the museum as well. I wanted to talk to you about the staffing for the museum and, to a lesser extent, the library. But a lot of the library was coming extant, over from underneath the Old State Capitol. But the museum staff was very new. I guess the first question is, were you involved at all in discussions about what the staff makeup would be?
- Blanchette: Peripherally I was. It was discussed in meetings that I was in. They were very interested in making sure that I would continue on in a public relations role with the museum. I said, "Yes, I would be very happy to." But as far as staffing levels, I was only aware that Bob Rogers had recommended a certain level of staffing for the museum, and someone arbitrarily took that number and said, "We don't need that many. Let's chop a third off that number." So that's what was started with, a number which was 30 percent or more lower than the designer of the museum had intended for the thing to be operated.
- DePue: Because of financial reasons?
- Blanchette: I don't know why, and I don't know who made that decision. But it was just right out of the box. If a carmaker says, "You need to change your oil this many times," and you say, "I don't think so. I'm going to knock off one of those oil changes" (laughs), it could have bad consequences for what you're doing. I think experience has borne that out, that there have been some operational issues with both the library and the museum because of lower than recommended staffing levels.
- DePue: We've talked quite a bit about these relationships before. But you've got IHPA staff and, before the creation of this museum, it was very much focused on historic sites.
- Blanchette: Right.
- DePue: And the library had a separate staffing. I assume there's going to be some plus-up on the library staff as well, but did you feel any tension or resentment coming from a lot of the people in the IHPA staff, about the creation of this new institution?
- Blanchette: Oh, yes. It was seen as being the golden child. They get what they want. They're seeing 100 people—I think that's about right, about 100 people—getting hired; they're getting all the publicity; they're getting everything new; people are bending over backwards for them. Yes, there was a lot of hard feelings among most of the people in the agency, especially with the Historic Sites Division that, for years, had made do with as few people as possible, with trucks with 200,000 miles on them, just use it up; wear it out; make it do, or do without was their philosophy. And here there's a brand new building getting everything.

Of course, they don't know the whole backstory of that and the fact that they didn't get everything they wanted. There were things that had to be cut back. They didn't get the staffing levels that they were supposed to get. So some of it was probably justified, but some of it, they just didn't understand the full picture and the fact that it was going to be good for everyone. And it did prove to be good for everyone. It did increase traffic at the Central Illinois historic sites, at least for the first few years of operation.

DePue: Were there folks who were coming to you to vent?

Blanchette: They always did (both laugh).

DePue: You were the receptive ear, huh?

Blanchette: Receptive. Because they thought I knew what was going on. In most cases I did, and in some cases I didn't, but could find out for them. If I was able to tell them, I would.

DePue: Do you have any particular stories that you remember in that respect?

Blanchette: I told them about the staffing levels, about how they had asked for a certain number, and they didn't get it, and how it was originally designed with more theaters than what it got, that the design was much grander than it ended up being, things like that, also trying to convince them.

The hardest thing to convince them [of], until it actually opened, was that we're going to draw crowds here, but we're going to send them out to your sites to visit. And their reaction was, "Yeah, right. That's not going to happen." But it actually did happen.

DePue: For the Lincoln sites.

Blanchette: Yeah, and for the sites in Central Illinois in general.

DePue: Did that downsizing of the staff recommendation result in, "Oh, my god, we're going to need a lot of volunteers?"

Blanchette: I don't think so. We always knew we would need a lot of volunteers and that that would be a very important part of the program, as it is for all the historic sites. So I think it just confirmed what we were going to do anyway, and that was have a very, very large, first-class volunteer corps.

DePue: Who were the key people who were going to be putting that part of the program together?

Blanchette: Oh, my. I wish I could remember names, whoever the first volunteer service coordinator was.

DePue: Julie Dirksen?

Blanchette: Yes. She had experience with Memorial Medical Center and some other places. She was very good about the initial recruitment and getting people,

who not only had an interest in history and were good at interpretation for the public, but also who she knew would have the time to put in the number of volunteer hours that it took.

DePue: We're not talking about five or ten or twenty or fifty volunteers, are we?

Blanchette: We're talking about 400 or 500.

DePue: How do you find 400 or 500 volunteers in a city where there are already a lot of institutions that are pulling in those volunteers?

Blanchette: Well, having something shiny and new helps. Having the two words, Abraham Lincoln, certainly helps. But Julie knew where to mine these people from.

DePue: Were you, as the information officer, involved with advertising this and trying to...

Blanchette: I was, because I was kind of like the Pied Piper, going to Kiwanis Clubs and Rotary Clubs and women's groups and church groups. I'd speak about this wonderful thing that was coming, and I would always give a pitch for, "We'd love to have some volunteers. Here's a brochure about volunteerism. Please contact..." Yeah, that was always part of my spiel.

DePue: Were you pleased, surprised by the reception you got?

Blanchette: Julie told me that it would be very well received, at least initially, and it was. She was right about that.

DePue: Here's an opportunity then. How important have the collection of volunteers we've had for these many years been to the operation of the museum?

Blanchette: It's been vital. It's like many of our historic sites; [we] just simply couldn't run it without the volunteers. For the most part, they are absolutely top-notch.

DePue: How about a very robust Education Department? Was that something that you had anticipated to begin with?

Blanchette: It was a priority, and I think a wise priority, to reach out to school groups because that's going to be a large part of your constituency, if you're talking about the education department at the museum, because that's mainly what it's geared toward is the schools that will visit. I think Erin Bishop, if I'm not mistaken, was the first education coordinator. She had a PhD and had had some really good background and had done similar work for the historic sites. So we got a very strong start with our educational program.

We coordinated with IHPA's education program. Pete Harbison and Keith Scully were **very** helpful. In fact, they were some of the most receptive individuals at the agency for this new monster, if you will (laughs). They were probably the earliest and most receptive because they realized, "Wow, this

could really bump up our educational efforts.” And it did. So I think the agency and the ALPLM helped each other in that respect.

DePue: Another thing that I don’t normally think of when I’m thinking about a new museum or institution like we’ve got across the street is the Theater Department. Was that something that was always part of Bob Rogers’ vision?

Blanchette: Theaters were very important. He had more theaters in there, in the design, than we ended up getting. I think he wanted three, and we ended up getting two.

DePue: Well, one of them was the IMAX theater.⁹³ It was simply way too expensive.

Blanchette: Yeah. And I’m not criticizing that decision. Obviously it had to be done. But he’s a showman; he’s a P.T. Barnum (laughs). He placed a high emphasis on the performance and the experience aspect. The Theater Department is a vital part of that.

We had an absolutely great theater person, living history person, in Phil Funkenbusch at the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, who worked with the various historic sites about costume, interpretation, first-person living history, performances, plays, musicals. They were able to get him from the Historic Sites Division. That left some hard feelings with Historic Sites Division because people in the sites loved Phil and loved what he had done for them.

Phil brought that passion and that knowledge to the Theater Department. It was vital because he knew, with his theater experience, what needed to be done, what kind of rehearsals had to be done, how you schedule things, just kind of these little things that nobody else knows, unless they’re in theater, including the fact that you’re going to have to pay Screen Actors Guild wages to the people who are performing in your theater, and that they can only perform a certain number of times per day by Screen Actors Guild regulations.⁹⁴ So he had to work all this stuff out. And I think the result, people will agree, is great.

DePue: Are we primarily talking about the actors in the *Ghosts of the Library*?

Blanchette: Yes. Yes, we are.

DePue: But I think if you were to sit down and talk to Phil, and I eventually will I would guess, the vision right from the beginning, and not just Phil’s, was that the Theater Department would be doing much more than that.

⁹³ IMAX is a system in which the image width is greater than the width of the film, often used for special-venue film presentations. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IMAX>.)

⁹⁴ Screen Actors Guild is the labor union that represents the film industry and its performers. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Screen_Actors_Guild.)

Blanchette: Yeah. That they would be doing performances in the plaza and even doing traveling performances. They did some of that. Not as much as they had hoped because they, like every other department at the museum, was recommended for a certain staffing level, and they didn't get that staffing level. So it impacted their ability to do more of what they would like to do, I think.

DePue: We've been talking about the Theater Department and so the show, but that institution across the street is very technologically driven. I would imagine it required, right from the beginning, some people who are expert on the technical side of it all.

Blanchette: Again, we were very fortunate to get someone like Sam Cooper early on, who had done... I'm sure I'll screw the story up, but he had done either some of the work during the construction for one of the contractors or was familiar with the work that had been done. So he came in with a working knowledge of what was there. His learning curve was very short, if non-existent. He and his people just absolutely worked miracles at that place and always have. If something goes wrong, you can call Sam or his people and it's like, boom, they know.

Something I forgot to mention is the projectionists. The motion picture industry has projectionists. Well, we have projectionists, too, because you have projectors at the museum. That's another thing that people don't realize, is that it's very cinematic. And because it's cinematic, you have the same rules and regulations that Hollywood has.

DePue: Are they officially members of the Screen Actors Guild?

Blanchette: I don't know if they are or not, but I know that certain provisions that Screen Actors Guild members have do apply at the museum.

DePue: You might not have any in-depth understanding of this one at all, but one of the other things that occurred on the staffing roster was my position, the oral historian position. Do you know how that got there?

Blanchette: I don't know how that got there. It was always part of the discussion, as far as I knew. You've got to question the choice they made but... (both laugh)

DePue: You couldn't avoid that one. How about the function of the foundation and the restructuring of the ALPL Foundation?⁹⁵ Was that going on about this time? I know that, initially, the fundraising was in it's construction phase, but then you've got the building. Was there some restructuring going on with the foundation as well?

⁹⁵ ALPL Foundation is a private, not-for-profit organization that supports the ALPLM. (<https://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/aboutus/Pages/AbrahamLincolnPresidentialLibraryFoundation.aspx>).

Blanchette: I'm kind of fuzzy on that. I do recall that at the very beginning the foundation was considered a critical player and that people like Estie Karpman and Susan Mogerman were very active in fundraising, and they got a lot of big donations, \$500,000 here, \$1 million there. These really started to add up. They were highly successful with it.

Something that they did, which was probably in retrospect not a good idea, was that they made the executive director of the library/museum also the head of the foundation. So Richard Norton Smith was that way; Rick Beard was that way. It was only after the Rick Beard [ALPML director and foundation president, 2006-2008] debacle that they decided, "This ain't such a good idea. Let's split this up."⁹⁶

DePue: We have talked about that a little bit. This might be another thing that you don't have much insight on, but the museum was going to be generating what we now know is direct support funds from the bookstore sales, from the restaurant, from events and things like that, that would be received by the foundation and I guess returned to support the library and museum activities. Can you give us any insights into that, or were you involved in that discussion at all?

Blanchette: I heard the discussion. I wasn't involved in it, but I was very aware of the discussion. It all hinges around what is and is not permissible in state government. State government makes it extremely difficult for any state agency to make money. If you do make money, they take it (laughs). They sweep your funds and give it to someone who's not making money. In order to avoid that, several of the moneymaking portions of the museum, like the gift store and the restaurant, were by design operated through the foundation because that way they could take in the money. They're not a state entity.

Then—because if they would then donate that back to the operation of the library/museum, that would then put it in the general fund, and it could be swept—instead of having them fund the operations, they would fund the special events, acquisitions, things that are one-time things. So, in case you have a really good fundraising month, you could buy more artifacts. But it's not something that you need to count on for your day-to-day operation of the facility. So, by design several portions of this place were meant to be operated by the foundation. That worked pretty well, I think.

DePue: I want to move on to then the opening of the museum itself, the library and museum. I guess my only caution here, to begin with, is don't get too far ahead of me because I want to spend some quality time talking about this. This is no small undertaking, I would imagine.

⁹⁶ The Rick Beard debacle is a reference to Beard's firing after he was charged with shoplifting in Springfield stores. (<https://www.-r.com/article/20151016/NEWS/151019631>).

First of all, we've already talked about the cornerstone and Governor Ryan's involvement with laying the cornerstone here for the library. But I believe it was October 14, 2004 that the library was formally opened and that Governor Blagojevich then was presiding. Do you remember anything about that day or that event?

Blanchette: It was a much smaller ceremony than the ceremonial opening with Governor Ryan. We had the ceremonial opening, then we found out that we had climate control issues, and that led to lawsuits and legal action. The one with Blagojevich was a little more low-key. We dedicated the Steve Neal Reading Room. So it was more medium-sized than large-sized, I think, because by that time, the public's eyes were focused on the museum across the street, "Wow, we can't wait to see that." So it was deliberately lower key.

Like most events involving Governor Blagojevich, the public face was very cheerful and affable, but behind the scenes there was a lot of swearing and screaming and shouting, not just between him and his wife (laughs), also between him and his staff. It was always, always very difficult to deal with Governor Blagojevich, always. I don't know what it was...

DePue: By that time, though, I would imagine you were in overdrive getting ready for the opening of the museum.

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: What I wanted to have you start with is what you did to lay the groundwork, in your official position, for the opening of the museum.

Blanchette: You've got to keep in mind—like we covered in the last session—when I had my falling out with Richard Norton Smith, he got his own public information officer, Christine Glunz, who did a lot of the groundwork with the Secret Service and the White House Communications Office.

What I did was I developed a lot of the printed materials, the news releases, the op-eds, the things that would be used by reporters when they're covering this. And I worked with my fellow state agencies on what they were going to provide and how we were going to characterize that and getting quotes from all the dignitaries. Then, when we got to a week or two out, it was decided that my job was to kind of babysit the press corps on the day of the event.

DePue: Before this, my assumption is that you had released scores, if not hundreds, of press releases for a variety of different events and activities. Was this qualitatively different from all the other press releases that would have been issued?

Blanchette: Qualitatively, no. Quantitatively it went worldwide, and we worked with DCEO [Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity], or whatever it was called at that time, to make sure that it went to virtually every nation on earth.

DePue: I guess what I want to get some insight from you on is how you package this, how you send that message out to now a nationwide and a worldwide market.

Blanchette: Lots of meetings, lot of conference calls, lot of emails sent back and forth because, when you've got the president coming, when you've got the current speaker of the house coming, when you've got the whole U.S. Illinois congressional delegation and most of the General Assembly and elected officials, you've got to satisfy everyone with your message. So the message development was as easy as it was for other things that I had done. But getting that tweaked and approved by everyone was like pulling teeth. There's so many egos to massage, so many people to make happy.

Then, working with... Bless their hearts, DCEO is tremendous at promoting tourism; they have a wonderful knack for doing it, for getting people through the doors. But sometimes the way they want things to be characterized in a news release is flowery PR language. It's not news language. I was writing so that reporters could use our news releases word-for-word, and it would look like they wrote it. That was my success in the past, as being a reporter for a number of years. I wrote how reporters write and how they think. That was the whole idea. If you want them to take your message and use it, write it as they would write it. So I would write it that way. Then I would have to argue and fight and claw and scratch with the people that wanted to change it into flowery PR language, with adjectives and adverbs. I'm like, "No. Write it as a news story. If you want them to use your message, write it in a way that they can use it." That was the toughest part.

By and large, we succeeded, mainly because we had a section with news stories like that, and then they had a flowery PR section on the other side of the PR folder—we used folders at that time, not USBs, [portable data storage devices for computers]—so everybody was happy. We had a big press kit, half of it newsworthy, half of it flowery PR. Everybody was happy.

DePue: You have already alluded to this. The invitation list is critical on this. Who's working that piece?

Blanchette: Oh, my. Whenever you have the president coming, the White House drives a lot of what happens.

DePue: How do you get the president in the first place?

Blanchette: It was probably Richard Norton Smith, either that or... Well, it couldn't have been Blagojevich. He wouldn't have called George W. Bush; he wouldn't have taken Blagojevich's call (DePue laughs). So, I think it was probably Richard Norton Smith that contacted his contacts in the White House and said, "We're having this opening. It would be great if the president and first lady could come." And, by golly, they came.

DePue: How critical was it to get the president?

Blanchette: Pretty critical. It elevates it from a national event to really an international event because when you have the president you probably get twice as much press coverage, just because the president is here.

DePue: Was there a concern going into it that you'd be able to land the president?

Blanchette: Richard was confident that we could. He never let on that he didn't think it [was] going to happen.

DePue: Was the specific opening day based somewhat on the president's personal schedule?

Blanchette: Somewhat. There's a short kind of window in which we could have done it. So, yeah, it was partially based on his schedule, yes.

DePue: Were you and the staff at the museum pleasantly surprised by the list of dignitaries that you were able to end up with?

Blanchette: Oh, yeah. It was a who's who of everyone with any Illinois connection, plus the president and the first lady.

DePue: But isn't it a testament to Abraham Lincoln, more than anything else?

Blanchette: It is. I think when it was just an idea, when we were just going around with drawings, people didn't know what to think. They thought, Here's a snake oil salesman. Yeah, yeah, yeah, this all looks good on paper, but it'll never happen. Well, once they saw the building going up and once we had things like the media hardhat tour... We would give select people sneak peeks in there during construction, and the word started getting out, like, "This thing is real." The excitement was building. Once people realized this is going to happen, I think that's what made the difference.

DePue: While we're in the area of who was invited, I want to go through the list. It is impressive. Then we'll continue to talk about the development or the planning for the event itself. President

Bush and Mrs. Bush;
Senators Durbin and
Obama, who was a new
senator at that time; House
Speaker Denny Hastert.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: Governor Rod Blagojevich,
Representative Ray
LaHood, [Springfield]
Mayor Karen Hasara,

Richard Norton Smith,
Julie Cellini, Bob Rogers,



President George W. Bush addressing the crowd during the dedication of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum on April 19, 2005.

the constitutional officers: Pat Quinn, Jesse White, Judy Baar-Topinka, Emil Jones. Now we're into the legislators: Mike Madigan, Frank Watson, Tom Cross., Governor Edgar, Gordon McClain [?].... Maybe that was the person that you didn't recognize before. [They were looking at a photograph during this discussion.]

Blanchette: That might be.

DePue: Do you know who that is?

Blanchette: I should, but I don't.

DePue: Tim Davlin, [Springfield] Mayor Davlin; Brian Lamb...

Blanchette: C-SPAN.

DePue: ... Mihan Lee, whom we'll talk about a little bit later. A pretty prestigious group was coming in for this.

Blanchette: Not to mention that the entire Illinois congressional delegation, each one of them had seats there. So, yeah, it was quite a sight on the dais.

DePue: What unexpected problems, leading up to the day itself or the series of events itself, do you recall?

Blanchette: Well, I was kind of laser focused on the media and making sure that they were accommodated. Christine Gluntz, as the PIO

of the institution, was mainly the liaison between the White House

Communications Office and us. Things would filter through her, and I was lining up my fellow public information officers from all agencies in state government, who were only too happy to volunteer for this—it's a once in a lifetime thing—just letting them know that this is going to be unlike anything you have ever done in your life.

We are going to have 400 to 500 reporters here from around the world, who are not used to being told what to do. We have to accommodate all of them; make sure they're happy; make sure they do good stories on this institution, because we can only do this once. We have one chance to get this right.



The news media came out in force to report on the dedication of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum in Springfield on April 19, 2005.

There were minor problems and a lot of ego issues with some of these national reporters, like, "I want to make sure I'm on this platform, and I have this kind of view of the president, and if there's any availability I want front." A lot of ego massaging, a lot of dealing with people calling about satellite trucks, "Where do we park our satellite trucks?" because there were probably two dozen of those from the news media organizations. "How do we get credentialed?"

A major focus of mine was, "Yes, we've got all these national, international reporters coming, but I want to make sure that our Springfield press corps and our State Capital press corps is accommodated as well as the people from NBC News and CNN and places like that." That was a major battle I fought, not only with the national press corps—making sure that they're okay with local media being with them on the riser—but also with some of the organizers of the event, who'd thought, "If we get national coverage, who cares about the locals? We don't need to worry about them." Well, yeah, we do (laughs), because once this event is over, they're going to be the ones covering us. So I have to make sure that they're accommodated. That was a constant battle.

I think it turned out rather successfully because we placed people equally on the risers, gave everyone equal access, equal sight lines, equal space at the mult box, which is what you plug your tape recorders into to get the sound for the event. I think it worked out pretty well.

DePue: I know that they had a series of soft openings.⁹⁷ What was the rationale behind doing the soft openings?

Blanchette: Very shrewd strategy. I think Richard Norton Smith had done this at several other institutions, where you bring in, like, the hospitality people, the hotel, restaurant people, and you give them a tour, a sneak tour. That way, when their guests come, they can talk up the institution. "Oh, you've got to go see the museum because it's got this and this and this in it." Or the taxicab drivers, people get in and say, "What's there to do in Springfield?" "Oh, you've got to see the museum. I've been there. It's great." They had the construction workers and their families that went through, similar to what Susan Lawrence Dana did when Frank Lloyd Wright built and designed the Dana-Thomas House for her here in Springfield around the turn of the century. As I recall, there might have been educators or some other groups. But very specific groups, sneak previews of mostly [the] operational museum, just to kind of get people excited and talking about it.

DePue: I was one of those people who had the opportunity. The group was either active duty military or military veterans. It was a veterans sponsored group.

⁹⁷ A soft opening is an occasion when a business is opened for the first time, but only to a limited number of people at first, a test run of sorts. (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/soft-opening>)

- Blanchette: Yeah. What did you think of it?
- DePue: Well, I usually don't share my opinions, but how can you not be impressed?
- Blanchette: Yeah (laughs).
- DePue: How about the press? Did the press get an advance look at the inside of the museum, or did they have to wait for everybody else?
- Blanchette: Yes. They got one of the earliest looks. We had...
- DePue: To include the national press that were here?
- Blanchette: Oh, not the national press, no. We had some live and tape-recorded coverage the week preceding the opening. In fact, Phil Rogers from NBC in Chicago, produced a very long Emmy award winning program on the museum. He spent days in there, with booms and lights and everything. But as far as prior to the opening week's festivities, we had what was called a media tour of the museum. It's not like the tour you might be thinking of. We had the media stationed in various rooms of the museum, which hadn't been outfitted yet. The walls were up; the floors were in, but there were no exhibits, no theaters; there was just empty spaces. And I taught each one of these reporters about his or her individual room.
- DePue: We did talk about this a little bit last time.
- Blanchette: Yeah. So they had buy-in from a very early time. The local press was bought in early on.
- DePue: Now, I would imagine part of the rationale for having the soft opening is just to make sure everything works. Was that part of the thinking?
- Blanchette: That's part of it.
- DePue: Were there some things that you guys found out in the soft openings that needed to be tweaked?
- Blanchette: Yeah, the *Lincoln's Eyes*. The *Union Theater* had a lot of moving parts, and I think Phil Funkenbusch and Sam Cooper were busy kind of tweaking that because you have a lot of scenery flying in and out, lots of pulleys, lots of chains, lots of moving things that can go wrong. Crowd flow [was another], little things like that that are fairly easy to correct. I don't think there were any major issues.
- DePue: Were the volunteers on hand to help with the process?
- Blanchette: They were and very helpful.
- DePue: The next thing was the opening on April 19.
- Blanchette: Two thousand five.

DePue: Two thousand five. But actually there are opening events from April 16 through 19. Can you give a quick overview of what was happening before the 19th itself?

Blanchette: Lots of events for all levels of participation, from family public events to recreated White House dinner for very big donors and performances and musical concerts and just a lot of things in and around downtown Springfield.

DePue: At the time of the opening for the museum, what was the status of the park across the street [Union Square Park]?

Blanchette: The park was still not developed, so it was as it had been for a number of years, kind of an urban park but hadn't had any major work done on it for several decades. Union Station still hadn't been restored yet. It was still the offices for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, or part of the agency, so not a lot of work, which made it easy to just kind of take that space over and put thousands of chairs and put some kind of mesh down over the whole thing so that people could walk on it, wheelchairs could be rolled on it. They just pretty much took over that park and just transformed it into a major ground-level stadium (laughs).

DePue: "They" being whom?

Blanchette: The White House directed everything, and we worked with the City of Springfield and with other agencies of the State of Illinois to make it happen.

DePue: Where do you get that many chairs?

Blanchette: Oh, Lord, I don't know where they got all the chairs (both laugh).

I know we had about 25,000 people there, both seated and standing.

DePue: You had a key role in this, working with the press. I'm sure there were lots of things that were running through your mind. In the days leading up to all of this were you nervous, apprehensive, excited?

Blanchette: Little bit of all that. I had done several presidential-level events at some historic sites before but nothing on this scale. The biggest one I had done previously was the Bill Clinton/Al Gore bus tour in Vandalia in 1992. This is ten times bigger than that, plus, the security considerations and dealing with the White House Communications Office. Thankfully Christine was there, because she had done that more recently than I had.

It was completely different. They're much more involved; much more has to be taken into account. Let's face it, we know that we're under pressure to do this right. When you serve at the will of the governor, if you screw up big-time, you may not have a job the next day. Even though I knew we had a good product, and I knew that everyone was going to like it, still, you're worried, like something major could go wrong here.

DePue: Like the weather. Was there concern about the weather?

Blanchette: We looked at the forecast; the forecast was great, maybe a tad on the warm side. They were concerned that maybe it would be too warm for some people to sit for any length of time. But it actually ended up being okay.

DePue: What was the plan if you had a thunderstorm or something like that?

Blanchette: I don't know what the plan was. If I [did], I don't remember.

DePue: That would dramatically change what was going on.

Blanchette: Yes, it would.

DePue: Do you know the size of the audience you ended up having on the 19th?

Blanchette: Yeah, 25,000.

DePue: How many chairs were out there? Something in that neighborhood?

Blanchette: Oh, no. There were only several thousand chairs, not 25,000. The crowd estimates came from the police, who were everywhere. Most of the people were standing on the streets and sidewalks around the area.

DePue: I've got to believe that it's the biggest crowd that downtown Springfield has ever had.

Blanchette: One of the biggest, if not the biggest—I wonder if maybe the Lincoln funeral might have had similar crowds—but certainly the biggest crowd in more than 100 years for an event.

DePue: Of course, Obama, Candidate Obama, had two events here in Springfield.

Blanchette: Because that space wasn't quite as open, they were only able to do like 12,000 or 15,000.

DePue: “That space” being the Old State Capitol.

Blanchette: Yeah. And I was involved, heavily involved, in that as well.

DePue: Oh, boy. How much do things change because the Secret Service is involved, and the president is coming?

Blanchette: Lots of things change. They said we had to cut trees down (laughs) in front of the museum, which they did.

DePue: Trees that had just been planted.

Blanchette: Just been planted along the sidewalk. That was done in the middle of the night, so hopefully people wouldn't notice that it was being done. And they didn't. They didn't notice until afterwards, and people started talking, and word gets out in a small community. “They cut trees down.” “Yeah, we did. We put them back,” (laughs) put some trees back.

The access, the checkpoints, the crowd flow. When you have the Secret Service involved... My involvement with this was specifically for the

media. And because of that, it's something called a preset, which means the night before the event, any media that has any equipment, like tripods, TV cameras, tape recorders, anything physical that they will be carrying in to do their job, has to be put in place the night before, on the platforms. Then everybody vacates the area. Then the Secret Service walks through with their bomb experts and their dogs, and they make sure that there isn't anything hidden in those devices that shouldn't be.

Then, when the media shows up, they go through the metal detectors. And, again, there's dogs there, and they're sniffed up and down and wanded or whatever. Then and only then can they rejoin their equipment. When you've got hundreds of news media individuals, that's a huge undertaking.

DePue: Not to mention, I'm thinking, this is a very open space that the president's going to be standing in, with buildings surrounding all sides.

Blanchette: Yeah. They had to have people leave those buildings for a certain number of hours. They had to clear all the parking garages within a multiple block radius. There could be no cars. If there were any cars... People were given weeks notice, several weeks notice, of this. Any cars that were left were towed. They did a last check of the buildings, with sight lines to the event area. And I think probably found some people who thought they could stay and learned the hard way they couldn't (laughs). They had to go on the street like everybody else.

DePue: Did you have an understanding or an acceptance of the minutiae or the scale of what the Secret Service had to do. Or do you think it might have been a little bit overblown?

Blanchette: Oh, no. They truly only get one chance. One of my earliest memories as a child is watching the coverage of the assassination of John F. Kennedy on television. So I was very aware of why. And as a news reporter, I remember the teletype going off when Ronald Reagan was shot and having to read that story live on the air, "President Reagan has been shot. We're not sure the extent of his injuries. We're waiting for word from the hospital." Having lived those two events—watching one and then reporting on one from a distance, admittedly—I had I had no reservations at all about... And I did not envy them their job.

It became a joke (laughs). Some of us who were dealing with them... I wasn't their main contact. But, still, you deal with the Secret Service, they're all over the place. It was a challenge for us: Can you get them to laugh? Can you get them to smile and get them to laugh? It's like the guards at Buckingham Palace. If you get them to crack a smile, you've done something. And we did. They're real people; they appreciate a joke. They just don't laugh quite as often (laughs) because they're a little more focused than those smart-asses like us, who are dealing with the press (both laugh). But I got a few of them to laugh and learned a little bit about some of them.

Some of them came from offices, like Springfield has a Secret Service office, for instance. And from time to time, I still run into those people, you just exchange pleasantries. By and large they're extremely focused on their job.

DePue: We live in an uncertain world. Was there a concern that the president might have to cancel at the last minute?

Blanchette: Always. We were going to do the event. As I recall, I might be mistaken on this, but I think Dennis Hastert was just going to take over and be the main speaker if that had to happen.

DePue: Well, he is third in line or second in line if the president's gone.

This is kind of a different subject, but how about the staff training in preparation? This is really part of the soft openings; the staff is training through all of that. Was there some special concerns about making sure the staff is functioning and the volunteers are functioning well?

Blanchette: Yeah. They especially did that with the guest services people, the ticket takers, the people at the front desk, the people that show people where to go, the people who answer questions about historic sites when people leave. They really put those people through their paces.

DePue: Got any stories related to that?

Blanchette: Not really. I was too involved really in dealing with the press to have much involvement with that nuts and bolts stuff at that time.

DePue: I'm finally at the point I'm ready to talk about the opening day itself and the ceremony. Let me just start with this. What are your memories of that day?

Blanchette: First of all, we had to get up at oh dark thirty (laughs) because we had to be in place before any of the press were let in. So me and my colleagues, the other information officers, got up very, very early. I remember it being just an absolutely perfect day. We couldn't have asked for a better day. And when we got onsite, the cordoned off area was empty at that point, so we were able to go to the risers. But there were thousands of people already packing the streets. We had to make our way through thousands of people. Then we had to go through the security checkpoint.

And then, it's an awesome moment, where there's only a handful of us and some Secret Service people and police, but essentially you've got acres of chairs, acres of mesh that people can walk on. You've got the podium; you've got everything, and you're just a handful of people in this area, which is soon to be filled with thousands and thousands of people. It's just an awesome moment, to know that in a few short hours we're going to be witness to history, and here we are, walking around everything that's set up. We talked about that, as we were walking as a group in there, like, "Isn't this the coolest

thing? I'll be telling my grandkids about this." We're taking pictures of each other and just kind of drinking in the moment.

Then the crap hit the fan, and we had to go to work (laughs). Actually, the crap didn't hit the fan. It went very well. It went as it should, but you've got 400-some-odd reporters, if memory serves me correctly, and 25,000 people, and you've got snipers on the roofs and police and dogs everywhere. I mean, what could go wrong, right? (both laugh). Actually, very little went wrong. It would only be minor, very minor things.

DePue: Let me ask you this question. I listed the people who made it onto the podium. Here are some of the people who didn't make it onto the podium: Dr. Tom Schwartz, Susan Mogerman, Bob Coomer. I think Bob Rogers was on the podium, but I'm not sure about that.

Blanchette: I don't remember if he was.

DePue: But these are the people, other than Julie Cellini, who was on the podium... Bill Cellini was not, as I recall.

Blanchette: I believe that's correct.

DePue: These are some of the people who made it happen. Without their involvement, it wouldn't have happened. Do you think there were any hard feelings over that?

Blanchette: If there were, they didn't express them. Did they deserve to be up front? Absolutely. But also it's very much a protocol thing. When you've got all those elected officials, they've got to go somewhere. I think all those people that you just mentioned were politically savvy enough to know that, "I need to suck it up and let these people have their day, and the institution will be much better for it in the long run."

DePue: You said the day went very smoothly. I've got a couple of questions here, just in terms of some of the comments that were made. Do you remember Senator Durbin's joke?

Blanchette: Oh, god. Something about somebody told him that Lincoln must have been Jewish because he was shot in the temple?

DePue: Yeah. I should know the name myself since I set up the story in the first place. A Chicago based politician, Marovitz, Abraham Lincoln Marovitz... I think the joke was that... I've got this in a couple of the other interviews, people who remembered the joke.

Blanchette: But that was the gist of it, right, that he must have been Jewish because he was shot in the temple.

DePue: Correct.

- Blanchette: Absolute silence (laughs) and a few groans. You could hear a few groans. I don't think it was the result he intended.
- DePue: Another one, an unscripted moment, at least from your perspective: Governor Blagojevich's comments about his ACT score.⁹⁸ Do you remember that one?
- Blanchette: I hadn't thought about that for a long time.
- DePue: He was standing in the podium and talked about how he was another person who rose from obscurity. Here's a guy with an ACT score of eighteen and became the governor of the state.⁹⁹ (both laugh)
- Blanchette: He also made some kind of comment about, "Richard, you've only opened museums for Republicans," or something like that. And "We'll have to change that in the future," or some such thing like that.
- DePue: What do you remember about this children's essay contest? Mihan Lee, I understand, was the winner of that.¹⁰⁰
- Blanchette: Yeah. We had a lot of participation in that. We publicized that months in advance, and we worked with DCEO and with our educational services program to get that out. There were thousands of... There were boxes and boxes of those essays that had to be read. So it was kind of a triage thing. I wasn't involved in that, judging, but I was involved in publicizing the end result, which is having her get up and read her essay.
- Boy, I sure hope that they kept all those essays for the collections of the presidential library because some of them were absolutely excellent. She was a good winner because she wasn't like a boastful person. She was very humble but very well-spoken. I think they really made a good choice.
- DePue: What impressed me is here's this young girl, who's standing in front of a crowd of thousands, and kept her composure all the way through it.
- Blanchette: Not only that, but if you're at that podium, you're getting the echo. It's like if you're in a stadium. It's very hard to talk in a stadium because you're hearing your words a split second after you're saying them. Yet she was able to do that and maintain her composure.
- DePue: What special memories—you've already shared quite a few—what special memories do you have from that day?
- Blanchette: The main memory is that, for most of the day, myself and my colleagues in communications and government were all thinking, We are a part of the

⁹⁸ ACT is a standardized test used for college admissions in the U.S.,([https://.wikipedia.org/wiki/ACT_\(test\)](https://.wikipedia.org/wiki/ACT_(test))).

⁹⁹ Thirty-eight percent of students taking the test had this score or lower, *ibid*.

¹⁰⁰ Mihan Lee, an 11th-grader at Georgetown Day School in Potomac, Maryland, won a nationwide contest with her essay, which she read for the dedication of the library and museum in Springfield, Illinois. Mihan said that by fighting for Koreans' right to express ideas in their own words, her grandfather had been fighting for the very right to have ideas. (<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2558490>)

biggest news story on planet earth this day. All the news media that matters for the entire world is here covering this event. What could possibly overshadow this? Well, that's the day that they chose Pope Benedict (laughs).

In fact, we became aware that Pope Benedict had been chosen because right in the middle of the ceremony... Here's all these TV producers and cameramen and reporters who are there and they have pagers and cellphones, and all at once all their pagers and cellphones are going off, and they're talking. It's their producers in D.C. or New York or London or wherever they are, saying, "A new pope has been chosen. Here's his name; here's where he's from. If you get a chance, ask President Bush (laughs) what he thinks about the new pope." I'm like, "No!" (laughs). That's going to be the number one news story, and we're going to go back to number two.

But Tom Schwartz, I remember him using this line—and I used this line a lot when I talk to groups—about Abraham Lincoln being the second most written about individual in human history, behind only Jesus Christ. So once again we're trumped by Jesus Christ (laughs). But, if you've got to be number two, that's not a bad person to be behind. We kind of laugh about it now, but... Actually, the press, once the event was over and President Bush shook a few hands and then went to his limo—which was parked just along the street next to the museum—to go, there was a kind of a surge of the media, that they became a little bit less ruly. They wanted to get close to him to shout questions about the new pope. But obviously it was set up in such a way and the crowd was so heavy that they really couldn't push their way to do that. So it became just a very minor problem there at the end, but that's the main thing I remember.

Also several of my colleagues, the communication managers, wanted pictures taken with them. I think there's one in there of January Smith with Senator Durbin, but they wanted, when the president was speaking, to get their picture, like here's them close-up, and there's the president way in the background. A lot of people did that, just star-struck moments like that.

DePue: How much coverage did you get at the national level and the international level?

Blanchette: Got a lot. I don't know how many hundreds of millions of media impressions, but it was hundreds of millions of media impressions. A media impression is when one person sees, hears, or reads the story, that is a media impression. You measure that by how many newspapers do you sell that have the story in it? How many broadcasts do you have that that have that mentioned in it and how many listeners? It's a very complex formula, but DCEO did some sort of count on it. When you add up all the coverage for about thirty days afterwards, both the coverage that day and then for thirty days thereafter, it was hundreds of millions of media impressions.

DePue: How much time did you get on the evening news?

- Blanchette: A minute to 30 seconds, which is not bad.
- DePue: Apparently you were hoping for more.
- Blanchette: For national news. Local news it was a whole newscast. And if they hadn't chosen a pope that day, we would gotten a little bit more, doggone it.
- DePue: But it is what it is, huh?
- Blanchette: Yeah.
- DePue: Did the day live up to your expectations?
- Blanchette: I think it exceeded it. I was walking on cloud nine after it was over. And after all the dignitaries had left, and the crowds were pouring into the museum, I just went in, and I just kind of blended in with the crowd. I just wanted to hear what they were saying. It was all awestruck; people were awestruck with the place, with the ceremony. A lot of people talking to their kids, like, "We were part of history today, Johnny," or "I hope you remember this, Sally, because this will be in the history books."
- DePue: How about all the folks on the podium? Did they have a chance to actually tour the museum as well?
- Blanchette: A lot of them did. Beforehand President Bush and Speaker Hastert had their own private tour. We've got a photograph of that, when that occurred. He [Bush] didn't tour the whole thing, but he was suitably impressed, to the point that I think he went back and told his people, who were thinking about his presidential library, "Hey, you've got to come to this place and see what it's like, because they've done it right."
- DePue: You can't get any better endorsement than that from a president, can you?
- Blanchette: No.
- DePue: You've already started to get into this, but what was the public reaction to the museum, not just that day and the huge crowds, but the next couple weeks afterwards, the next month or so afterwards.
- Blanchette: The public was pouring in. Bob Rogers told us that it would be so, that after you've opened, you'll have lines out the door for quite a while. And we did, overwhelmingly positive. The only complaints, I think, were that one of the theaters might have been too loud, or maybe you might not want to bring young children in there because there are explosions and smoke, and it might scare some people.

It was only after we'd been open for a few weeks or months that the media then started to pick apart little things, like the *Chicago Tribune* did a major series about what isn't quoted exactly in there in the theater script, or who might be portrayed in the paintings in the museum. I think the press felt a little bit guilty about all the accolades that they were giving and thought,

"We'd better start doing our job and present a balanced coverage of this and balanced means negative, by golly." (laughs)

DePue: Ray Long [investigative reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*], I know, was one of the people in the Chicago press that was dealing with the faces and the images that had started appearing in some of the exhibits.

Blanchette: Well, he also did in some of the other stories. He took like the scripts for some of the theater productions, where we were paraphrasing people rather than directly quoting people, to make it more theatrical, to make modern audiences understand the work. If you talk in Victorian terms, modern audiences might not pick up on everything, so they paraphrased some of it. He did a story about that, that the quotes aren't exact—no, of course not; they're paraphrases—and a couple of other things. And he talked to people like John Y. Simon, who hated the place from the moment it was an idea.¹⁰¹

DePue: Well, let me quote John Y. Simon.

Blanchette: He gave us a great quote, by the way. He gave us a negative quote, which actually... You're probably going to read it.

DePue: "Six flags over Lincoln" was one of the phrases that he had for it. "The rubber Lincolns make him remote, strange, and mythological. They've made him into a vulgar creature, not unlike Ronald McDonald, welcoming you to his hamburger place."

Blanchette: That actually brought more people in, because they wanted to see what all the hullabaloo was about.

DePue: And here's what *Time Magazine* said, picking up on some of the negative criticism that came out shortly after it opened. "Historians have begun to criticize the museum, saying there's too much razzle-dazzle and not enough scholarship." Harold Holzer [Lincoln scholar]—I think you and I have talked about Harold Holzer; certainly in other interviews I have—here's his response to the criticism, "In an era where we battle iPods and MTV for attention, anything that encourages future exploration is good."

Blanchette: Yeah. And we actually had a quote from him in the press materials that I developed. I got a lot of quotes from historians and respected authors. That wasn't the quote I got, but he was a... Have we talked about the fact that I think he was probably the first one to be considered for the director?

DePue: Yeah.

Blanchette: So he knew. He got it. He understood what we were trying to do.

¹⁰¹ John Younker Simon was an American Civil War scholar known for editing the papers of Ulysses S. Grant. Born in Highland Park, Illinois, he was on the history faculty of Southern Illinois University Carbondale, for 44 years. Simon had MA and PhD history degrees from Harvard University. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Y._Simon)

DePue: And Allen Guelzo, another very, very highly regarded Lincoln historian...

Blanchette: Who looks like [actor] Kelsey Grammer from *Cheers* [a TV comedy] (both laugh).

DePue: If you think so, that's fine.

Blanchette: I think so.

DePue: [Guelzo said], "I think it really will be an important impetus to Lincoln studies and keeping the figure of Abraham Lincoln right out in front of America's attention."

Blanchette: Agreed.

DePue: So you had eminent historians responding to some of the negative criticisms, which I'm sure you guys had to feel good about.

Blanchette: Yeah. We actually went very proactive with that. That's why I did an entire piece of nothing but positive historian and author quotes, because we knew there would be some naysayers. So you head them off with... You drown them with positive comments.

DePue: I want to finish this part of the discussion then with Bob Rogers' vision. This is something that, when he and I had our interview, he really emphasized, the vision going in to designing the museum and the exhibits for it: "That the visitor should emerge with a greater attraction to and fascination with the life and the times of Abraham Lincoln."

Second point, "This interest should translate into both immediate and life-long follow-up expressions of interest, such as increased reading, site visitation, talking about Lincoln, and learning about Lincoln." And his final point, "We will achieve this by celebrating life stories, contributions, frustrations, and achievements of Abraham Lincoln and by giving the public access to the inspiring real objects from his life and times." As public information officer, were you in sync with Bob Rogers' vision, going into it?

Blanchette: Yes, I was. And I think if there was a place where we might have fallen down a little bit, it's probably the longer term follow-up because he talks about a life-long interest. Yes, this place incites interest, when you're in there and shortly after you leave. We need to keep that long-term follow-up going. We need to keep encouraging them to read and enjoy history. If anything, possibly some corners were cut in those long-term, follow-up efforts. I don't know if it's the Education Department that wasn't staffed enough that we couldn't do that or...

DePue: What kinds of things are you talking about?

Blanchette: I don't know that I have a specific idea, but you need to forge a lifetime bond with the people that come through and are excited by the Lincoln Presidential Museum. They're not going to keep coming, year after year after year. Some

people do, but most people don't. So there has to be a way of just kind of grabbing hold and keeping their interest. Amazon does it. After you finish a book, they send you an email, "If you liked that book, maybe you ought to read this one." Just some kind of... I don't know what it is. When you're reading those goals that Bob Rogers had... He may agree also that it may have been something we might have wanted to focus on a little bit more, just this lifelong aspect. The foundation does it through membership. But it's got to be difficult for them to keep people's interest up.

DePue: How do you even measure things like that though?

Blanchette: I don't know. This is just an impression of mine. I haven't discussed it with anyone. It's just kind of the impression I get.

DePue: Part of it is to measure if there's been an increase or decrease in the amount of books and articles that have been written about Abraham Lincoln. It doesn't seem to have dropped off any in the intervening years.

Blanchette: No, no. But I think that's Lincoln himself is driving that, not so much the institution. The institution helps, but just the figure of Abraham Lincoln, both mythical and real, keeps driving that.

DePue: Once the building is open, now the history of the building, history of the institution, certainly keeps evolving. January, 2006, not all that long after this celebrated opening, is the timeframe when Richard Norton Smith resigns.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: Do you have any insights into what led to that decision?

Blanchette: For one thing, he had a history of not staying too long at each institution. I think a lot of the things that he did, in order to make things succeed, also tended to rub the movers and shakers the wrong way. You just reach a point where you've pissed off enough movers and shakers that it's just time to move on, before they decide, "We'll move you on." (laughs) He knew that that would come. In fact, he would say that periodically in meetings. "Well, I'll only be here for a few years. I'll wear out my welcome before ..." And sure enough.

DePue: When you say movers and shakers, you need to put some names to that.

Blanchette: At the time it would have been the Governor's Office. It probably would have been the Cellinis. It probably would have been the IHPA Board. I'm speculating as to who.

DePue: So they weren't necessarily coming to you talking about their frustrations with Richard?

Blanchette: Some were. I heard, not from the governor but from people on the governor's staff, that "Richard did this. He should have checked with us first." You just kind of get a sense for... I don't think it was anything bad that he did. I just

think it was just his MO [*modus operandi*]. You go in like a bull; you know what needs to be done; you do things, and you know what needs to be done to keep it going, and if someone steps in your way you just run them over. You run over enough people that eventually... (laughs)

DePue: David, last time we met you talked about the incident where you got run over.

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: By Eric and Richard.

Blanchette: Exactly. I know exactly, and I still think he was the right person to... Yes, I got the license number of the truck, but I'm glad the truck was (laughs) running people over, because it needed to be done to get this place open and operating.

DePue: It's a very high profile institution. I don't need to tell you that. So what do you do when the director has suddenly resigns?

Blanchette: They did what I think was a good idea at the time, as you start a nationwide search. You would think that, after Richard Norton Smith, somebody equally as high profile might want to step in, like a Harold Holzer or somebody, or that you might want to elevate someone like Tom Schwartz, who I certainly supported doing that.

DePue: He was the interim director, correct?

Blanchette: Yeah. For some reason, those that were making decisions didn't want Tom to be elevated. He was okay as an interim, but for some reason they wanted to do a nationwide search and find somebody. So we were just poised for a nationally known figure, like a Harold Holzer, to come in or somebody that is known nationally. When they announced who it was going to be, Rick Beard... Who is Rick Beard? We actually had to do some research to find out who he was, because it wasn't a name that was on the tip of everyone's tongue.

I don't know if other people just didn't apply for it or if the search wanted maybe someone with a little bit less name recognition, little bit less of an ego than Richard Norton Smith. I don't know. I wasn't involved in that search. I was just involved in helping publicize it once the search had been completed.

DePue: Who's making the selection? Is it the board of trustees?

Blanchette: I think it was a combination of the board of trustees and the Governor's Office and there may have been... The foundation board may have had something to say about it, as well, because the head of the institution was still the head of the foundation at that time.

DePue: There's overlap between the board of trustees and the foundation board, is there not?

Blanchette: Some.

DePue: Early impressions of Richard, once he got on board?

Blanchette: Rick Beard, you mean?

DePue: Yeah, excuse me, Rick Beard.

Blanchette: Pretty positive. He seemed like he wanted to work with everybody. He listened to people's suggestions and took them to heart. He had some good ideas for some temporary exhibits, like packaging presidents, which was going to be up in time for an upcoming election; the timing was perfect. So initially, he was saying and doing all the right things.

DePue: Did Christine Glunz leave about the same time that Richard [Norton Smith] moved on?

Blanchette: Yeah. In fact, I think she left a little bit before Richard moved on.

DePue: So you were now in the role at both IHPA and ALPLM?

Blanchette: Yeah. I never really left that role, but in daily dealings with Richard, anything that he wanted done, he would deal with her.

DePue: I want to put in a couple dates to lead into my next series of questions. May 7, we believe, 2007, Dr. James Cornelius is hired as the Lincoln curator. May 29, Carla Smith just told me that she is hired as the registrar, and her first day here was the date that the trucks arrive with the Louise Taper collection (both laugh). Your laughter suggests there might be a story or two in here.

Blanchette: Carla is a very unassuming, soft-spoken person. And that's not going from the oven to the fire; that's going from the fire to the flamethrower (laughs).

DePue: Tell me about the background of the acquisition of the Taper collection.

Blanchette: Well, the foundation was in discussions for a long time with Louise Taper about acquiring... And I think the way that it ended was that they agreed to pay a certain amount, and then she would donate the value of the remaining amount, because she wanted more for the collection than what they were able to pay.

DePue: Who is she?

Blanchette: She's one of the world's top collectors of Lincoln historical material. She lives in Beverly Hills. She and her late—I think it's late—husband, Barry, multimillionaires. We had done a joint exhibit with them at the Huntington Library in California. She had a lot of big ticket items, the stovepipe hat, a lot

of assassination things.¹⁰² It was a collection we definitely wanted here. The foundation agreed to pony up the money for it, some of which they had up front, most of which they had to raise over a period of years. So they took out a note to do so.

DePue: Talk about the finances of the purchase. You say they took out a note, essentially a loan?

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: The foundation did?

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: My understanding is that \$2 million worth was donated, and \$21 million was the amount of the purchase.

Blanchette: Sounds about right.

DePue: How do you raise \$21 million? Was there a clear understanding at that time?

Blanchette: We had a great thing with James Cornelius—who's a natural storyteller—who would take an item from the collection, and we'd do a video about it, and we'd do a website post, and we'd do a news release. Once a month we would feature an item. That got some pretty good coverage. That kind of ran out of steam after a year-and-a-half or so.

When you went through the really big ticket items that the public would really want to know about, we went through those in about a year-and-a-half. Then you're down to still significant items but that don't quite catch the public's interest. So excitement about that waned a little bit. I don't know how much they were able to raise during that time, and I don't know how much they have left to raise, but I think it's a sizable sum that they still need to raise to pay it off.

DePue: And the amount that still needs to be paid off is very much part of the discussion, the political discussion, that's been swirling around the institution for the last year or more?

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: Do you think, personally, that it was the right thing to purchase and that the cost was appropriate?

Blanchette: I'm not an appraiser, so I don't know about the cost, but I think it was the right move to make.

¹⁰² The hat was purchased from Louise Taper in 2007 by the private Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation for display at the museum. Around 2018 the question of its authenticity loomed large. [<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/23/us/abraham-lincoln-museum-hat-controversy.html>]

DePue: But you did have to deal with some of the criticisms that started to occur, I believe, a couple of years after the actual purchase.

Blanchette: I had to work with the foundation to try and justify why this collection was acquired.

DePue: Bruce Rushton of the *Illinois Times*, was he an early critic of the institution and of this purchase?

Blanchette: He has been a continual—what Theodore Roosevelt would call—muckraker, talking with people inside the institution who have an ax to grind and then taking snippets of insider information and turning them into news stories to try and generate—and effectively; he very effectively generated—news stories out of it. There is no 100 percent good—that's not the right way to say it—there is no institution that exists whose story is 100 percent positive. There are always going to be setbacks; there are always going to be things people don't agree with at every institution. But he ignores the 90 percent positive and zeroes in on the 10 percent or less that might be controversial or that people might latch on to as, hey, why did they do that?

DePue: Was there anything particular? Was there a reason for any personal animus, or do you think that's just his MO?

Blanchette: I think it's his MO. It's served his career well to operate that way. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

DePue: The next couple of questions then deal with provenance issues. Let's start it this way. I have heard that you had a conversation, an interview, with David McKinney of the *Chicago Sun Times* about the provenance of the Lincoln hat?

Blanchette: The Lincoln hat provenance is as good as or better than a lot of the provenance on widely accepted historical items. This became an issue—and I found this out much later on, when I was trying to get to the bottom of where all this started—this became an issue, I believe, that originated in the animosity between Eileen Mackevich at the museum and Carla Knorowski at the foundation.

They had worked together, apparently in Chicago, many years ago and had a falling out and never patched things up. When Carla was named the head of the foundation, I heard many people come up to me and say, "Oh, this isn't going to be good because she and Eileen don't get along."

DePue: Can I provide a little bit more background here?

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: You can challenge this. Frank J. Williams wrote an article, a lengthy article, entitled "Lincolniana." That's the name of the article—I butchered that. I think this came out in the spring of 2013. He was relating some of this background to this issue of the provenance. The *Illinois Times* on March 21—he doesn't have the date here so I don't know what particular year this would be—

featured Bruce Rushton, "Buyer Beware," in which he reported that the State of Illinois, through then state historian Tom Schwartz, was warned by appraiser Seth Kaller about "serious questions of provenance regarding three purported Lincoln items about to be purchased for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield."

This would have preceded the purchase of the Taper collection. "These included a clock that allegedly came from the Lincoln Law Office, a hat once purportedly belonging to Lincoln, and a fan that Mary Todd Lincoln was believed to have carried the night of the assassination at Ford's Theater." Then it goes on to discuss that in a little bit more detail, and that there was... Seizing on the lack of provenance, Neil Steinberg wrote "Lincoln's Relic or Just an Old Hat" for the February 26 *Chicago Sun Times* article. Neil Steinberg, is that another name familiar to you?

Blanchette: Yes, it is.

DePue: I'll turn it over to you here now.

Blanchette: That was the end result of what happened, but it is my opinion that the root of this was an attempt to sabotage the foundation because of Carla Knorowski being the head of the foundation. I've long believed that. I was able to establish a relationship between several of the players in this drama that led to Dave McKinney. My conversations with Dave about how he got his information... He's a reporter. He doesn't give up his sources.

During my numerous discussions with him, it became obvious that the information could have only come from a very limited scope of individuals, who had very specific knowledge of this. He was getting his information from very, very far inside this institution. And Bruce Rushton was getting his information from very, very far inside this institution. It became obvious that Bruce was getting his information directly from Eileen Mackevich and continues to do so to this day.

DePue: Are there any other names that you think are possibly passing that information on or have axes to grind?

Blanchette: I think at the time one, of the IHPA trustees was involved, as well.

DePue: And?

Blanchette: Since I can't prove that, I'd rather not name a name, but that person is no longer an IHPA trustee.

DePue: I was going to ask you a name, and I guess you would prefer that I don't ask you the name.

Blanchette: Yeah, because I am pretty certain about Eileen and her connection with Bruce Rushton, but I'm not certain about this other person and that person's connection. So rather than besmirch a name...

DePue: Always the careful journalist, huh?

Blanchette: Well, why needlessly ruin a reputation, if the person's not ... I strongly suspect, but I don't have a smoking gun. I have the smoking gun with Eileen talking to Bruce Rushton. See, the *Chicago Sun Times* will not use information unless they can independently confirm it. But they were getting the exact same information that Bruce Rushton got from Eileen Mackevich, so it had to originate with her.

DePue: Continuing on the timeline then, April 2008, Jan Grimes becomes the new director of IHPA. You're still PIO for both sides of that institution?

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: Your relationship with Jan?

Blanchette: Very good. In fact, she became director as a result of me, because I also represented the Illinois Capital Development Board [CDB]. Shortly after the museum opened, a colleague of mine, Melanie Arnold, who had been the information officer for Capital Development Board, took a better position as the information officer for Department of Public Health. And since we had worked together very closely on issues regarding the building of this particular building, she said, "Can you also take on CDB for a few months?" I said, "Sure. It won't be a problem. We've got this place open. I can take on a little bit more." It ended up being a number of years (laughs), rather than a few months.

At some point during my service in that regard to CDB, Jan Grimes became the director of the Capital Development Board. At that time, Governor Blagojevich had directors and public information officers going out around the state, doing surrogate events, trying to get his name in with good things. One of the good things is building, because that puts people to work, gives roads, gives buildings. So she and I spent a lot of time in the car, and I would just tell her what a great agency IHPA was, what a great facility ALPLM was. And she said, "I'd just love to work for them sometime."

When I found out Bob Coomer was retiring, I mentioned it to Jan. "Now's your chance. If you want to come work for the agency, now's your chance, before it becomes public knowledge." She went to the governor's office and said, "I'd like to make this move." And so she did.

DePue: The next shoe to drop, then, October 2008. I want to hear your side of the story, hearing about concerns about Rick Beard.

Blanchette: Oh, my (laughs). This is something you couldn't dream up in Hollywood. None of us had any indication that there was anything amiss with Rick Beard or his personal life.

The first shoe to drop was, I got a call in my office at the museum from a *State Journal-Register* reporter who covered court proceedings in

Sangamon County. He says, "I was just in court, and there's a shoplifting case involving a Rick Beard." And he says, "I just want to confirm—that's a pretty common name—I just want to confirm, is this your guy, or is this somebody else?" He says, "It might not be your guy, but I'm just covering all my bases." I said, "Oh, yeah, no problem, no problem. I'm sure it's not him. Let me go down the hall and just stick my head in and put this rumor to rest."

I went down the hall. Rick Beard's office is just down the hall. I said, "Rick, you're going to laugh about this one, but I've got to ask it. I just got a call from the *State Journal-Register*. It's about a court case today." And before I got the rest of it out of my mouth, he said, "It's true! All right. I pled guilty to shoplifting. What more do you guys want?" I'm like, "Uh, what?" (both laugh).

"Rick, you better tell me about this." And he says, "I was in court today. It's a big misunderstanding. Rather than drag my name through the press in a trial, I decided to plead guilty and put the matter to rest." I said, "This is not something that we can just... This is big news. This is huge news." He said, "Well, does the Governor's Office have to know?" I said, "Yeah, like now, right now." (laughs)

So I called Jan Grimes. I said, "You need to get down here right away." I said, "There is something you absolutely have to know." I gave her kind of a thumbnail of it on the phone. She said, "Oh, my god. Oh, my god." She realized immediately what repercussions this could have. I called the reporter back in the meantime, and I said, "Off the record, there's probably something to this, but let me get back to you when I'm able to say something on the record."

We spent all of that afternoon and all that evening dealing with the Governor's Office. At one point the Governor's Office said, "He is to be escorted out of the building. You are to take his keys. You are to lock his office. He is temporarily on administrative leave while we're looking into this." It just blew up. And as soon as I was able to talk on the record with the *State Journal-Register*, they put it on the wire. All of a sudden it's a national news story. As this is going national, and my cellphone is ringing with calls from around the country, wanting a comment on this, Jan Grimes had walked down to the museum to deal with this issue.

Well, we had to escort Rick Beard out of the building. I forget; I think the weather was bad or something, and neither of us had our cars there. Rick said, "Oh, I'll give you a ride" (laughs). So here's this gentleman who is going through the worst crisis in his life, and the two people that just helped escalate this crisis to a national issue got in a car with him, and he drove us back to the office at the *Journal-Register*. It was so surreal, just such a surreal... He kept asking, "Do you think I'll lose my job over this?" And Jan, as tactfully as she could put it, said, "Yeah, I think you will." "Do you think this will affect my future career?" I said, "Yeah, I think it will." It was just...

This was during the Blagojevich years, where they didn't want anybody speaking on the record without them approving each and every word of what was said. The very next day, after we had all the facts in hand, they took the extraordinary step of saying, "Dave, we want you to go to the blue room at the State Capitol," which is where the press conferences were held at that time. "We want you to assemble all the reporters, and we just want you to answer every question you can about this, and put this story to rest."

I had my own, individual, solo news conference at the State Capitol, answered every question as honestly and as forthrightly as I could about the Rick Beard situation, which made it a huge international story for about a day, and then the story went away.

DePue: As I understand it, there wasn't just one incident of shoplifting.

Blanchette: No. He told us initially this was the only time this had ever happened. Well, we found out later it wasn't. But by then, he had been relieved of his duties.

DePue: What was he shoplifting?

Blanchette: *Seinfeld* [a TV sitcom] DVDs and neckties, as I recall. It was little stuff. And it was obvious that this had not been for profit or for personal use, that it was just kind of an illness thing.

DePue: Was there something going on in his personal life that would explain what had happened, that it had been going on for years?

Blanchette: Not that I know of. I was thrust into it by a phone call from the *State Journal-Register*.

DePue: Was he married?

Blanchette: I'm not sure if he was.

DePue: I understand—let me prod your memory a little bit—he was married, but his wife wasn't living here.

Blanchette: I think that's correct.

DePue: I would imagine that would be some of the kind of questions that were being asked of you.

Blanchette: Yeah. And my memory was much fresher then because I was dealing with it twenty-four/seven, but I don't recall it right now though.

DePue: What happens in terms of leadership of the library and museum after that?

Blanchette: Since this was sudden and unanticipated, Jan Grimes took over the day-to-day operation of the library/museum, in addition to her duties as the director of the agency.

DePue: Tom Schwartz had been interim director before. Why not have Tom Schwartz fill that role again?

Blanchette: I'm not sure why the decision was made to put Jan in there.

DePue: It was roughly this same timeframe when we were hearing rumors that there would be a downsizing of Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, that Governor Blagojevich had determined that this institution needed to be downsized, I believe that the state parks, some of the state parks, might be closed, and that DCFS [Department of Children and Family Services] might be a target as well. Do you recall dealing with that issue?

Blanchette: Yeah. We actually had to close some sites down or greatly reduce operations. I remember that because one of the first things Pat Quinn did as governor was reopen the historic sites. So yeah. It would have been right around '08 because the bicentennial was '09, and that's when Pat Quinn became governor, after Blagojevich's ouster. So, yeah, I remember that.

It was more of the same, of things that we had done every couple of years throughout my history with IHPA. You go and you're like, "Okay, people, these sites that you've been able to visit, you're going to be able to visit fewer of them now, or the hours are going to be reduced."

DePue: Do you understand the rationale the governor and the Governor's Office had in targeting IHPA and state parks and DCFS?

Blanchette: Yeah, it's a very public gesture, to try and drum home the fact that "We're facing a fiscal crisis, and we need to make cuts. If the legislature doesn't want to step up and make the hard decisions, we're going to make it." And they're going to be visible. We've always been a target.

DePue: That was his rationale?

Blanchette: I think so.

DePue: Was there something personal that he didn't like about what was going on at IHPA or ALPLM?

Blanchette: I don't think so. He was a big Lincoln fan. He would always quote Lincoln, usually wrongly (laughs). But no, he was a Lincoln fan, and I don't think there was animosity.

DePue: Well, not to make this too personal, but I was one of the people that was bumped out of a job. That was December 1. So that was the official date of these actions.

This is a date you probably will remember, as well. December 1 is the date that all of the bumping occurred. December 8 is the date that Governor Blagojevich was arrested in Chicago.

Blanchette: I remember that. I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing. I was coming down Madison—because that's one way—going to the parking garage at the museum. I was a couple of blocks away from the parking garage, had news radio on. The story broke, right when I was coming down Madison Street, and I almost ran a red light. The light was red; I was sitting there, just turned the radio up. I'm like, "Am I hearing this? Am I hearing this?" And the cars that had pulled up beside me—it's rush hour—you could tell they were doing the same thing. All of a sudden the horns start honking. The windows are shut because it's winter, but I can see people going, "Yeah! Yeah!" And horns are honking (both laugh).

I pulled in the parking garage, and I couldn't even make it into the building, like, "Have you heard? Have you heard?" The security people and the people that were coming into work at the museum, like, "Guys, guys, guys. I've got to find out exactly what's going on. This impacts us directly. We need to know what we're going to do." It was one of those surreal moments in my state service.

DePue: Were you as elated about this as most of the other people you were seeing around you?

Blanchette: Hell, yes. I didn't like him at all.

DePue: Because?

Blanchette: I had seen him behind the scenes and what a ruthless, cutthroat, vulgar, mean, vindictive person that he was. I couldn't stand the man. I couldn't stand what he had done to people I was close to. Couldn't stand what he had done to this great agency. And it didn't come a moment too soon.

DePue: What were your feelings about Quinn, being lieutenant governor, now becoming the next governor, after the impeachment in January.

Blanchette: Well, first of all, my history with Pat Quinn went back a long way, when I was a reporter. I covered him during the legislative cutback amendment, and he was kind of a young, brash young guy. He was hip-hopping the state, pushing for this initiative. And I remember interviewing him at the time and coming away from that interview thinking, "What a nutcase this guy is." (laughs) I've told him this story, and he appreciates this. But I said, "He'll never get this done. He's a nut job." And now here he is as governor.

But, interestingly enough, one of the very first interactions I had with him as governor was during the Lincoln bicentennial in 2009. He had been on the job less than a week, and here we had now President Obama coming to speak at the Crowne Plaza for Abraham Lincoln's two hundredth birthday.

This time, I dealt directly with Secret Service. There was no intermediary. It was me, setting this up. I had to get them to approve everybody who was attending this, all the guests, all the dignitaries. Well, Pat

Quinn was on the list, but he wanted to bring his son. His son wasn't on the list.

The Governor of Illinois, my new boss, shows up at the door, and Secret Service calls me down and says, "Governor's here and wants to bring somebody extra who's not on the list." So I go down, and his son is there. Governor [Quinn] said, "Hi, you're Dave Blanchette?" I said, "Yes. Yes, I am." He says, "Well, they say that they need to talk to you about this. This is my son who wants to come in." I kind of pulled the head agent aside. I said, "This guy's my new boss. Can we squeeze the son in, please? It'll make me look real good." And he said, "All right. He goes through the metal detectors and everything like everybody else, but as long as you vouch for him, it's okay." So I went back to the governor. I said, "I got your son in for you." (laughs) Ding, ding, ding, points with the new boss. He never forgot that. And then years later, when he asked me to join his staff, he still remembered that story; he still appreciated what I had done for him.

DePue: Let's talk about the [Lincoln] bicentennial year. What was involved with that? How big a deal was the institution trying to make of it?

Blanchette: Huge, absolutely huge. Marilyn Kushak was named the chairman of the state commission. I knew her very well because she owned one of the local radio stations. They hired Kay Smith as the day-to-day coordinator person, excellent, first rate. We had top-notch people working on it. And the great thing about this small but very mobile, very adaptable group of people that wisely was appointed by Blagojevich, based on suggestions of people who knew what they were talking about... So, we were full of this group of people that could actually get things done.

It was a very creative group of people that would take anyone's suggestions, no matter how wild, and actually turn them into reality, like the bicentennial motorcycle, the post-it note portraits of Abraham Lincoln, the church bell ringings across the state, all this grassroots stuff that didn't cost a lot of money—because we didn't have a big budget for it—yet we're turning all this into a celebration that everyone feels like they have a part of. And this institution was ground zero for it, [continues a list of events] the Gettysburg Address reading, [the] attempt to break a world record with that. It originated here in the museum, the nationwide broadcast with Governor Quinn, and I think it was Fritz Kline, leading the reading. We didn't get the world record, but we got nationwide publicity over it.

It turned out that Illinois PR efforts surpassed that of the national and all of the individual states combined. Our PR efforts beat everyone else combined, with a budget that was much smaller than anyone else had. It was the most fantastic thing I've been involved with since the development and opening of this museum.

DePue: One of the things I recall is the coin, the Lincoln pennies.

Blanchette: Yes. The U.S. Mint debuted not one but two of the new Lincoln pennies, right here in Springfield, as part of the multiyear... We didn't just observe the bicentennial in '09; we observed it from like '08 through '10. The director of the U.S. Mint came here on both occasions, and we debuted the pennies, the new pennies, both of them.

DePue: Did it result in increased attendance at the museum as well?

Blanchette: Yes, it did.

DePue: Were the attendance numbers that you were getting through the museum meeting expectations, exceeding expectations?

Blanchette: They exceeded expectations the first few years of operation, then met expectations from there after. There were a few dip years where it dipped below 300,000, which we didn't want to see. But I think those were years where we were following national trends for reduced visitation just about everywhere else.

DePue: That's right, because 2008 is important in another respect, at the end of the year, with the collapse of the economy, the election of Barack Obama, and deep, deep recession in the next couple of years after that. Did that have a negative impact that you could see? At the same time the bicentennial's going on, you're fighting that trend.

Blanchette: We bucked that trend with the bicentennial, but we could have had better attendance had we not had the recession to deal with because when you've got a recession, people don't travel as far. So you're getting more local visitors but less who come from a distance. The bicentennial helped a great deal to bolster our numbers for the period of time that we were observing it.

DePue: Let's continue then with the discussion about the search for a new director. The last time, when it was Rick Beard, there was a nationwide search. I think they hired—what's the correct term—a headhunting firm to help them do that. Do you recall them doing that for the next time around?

Blanchette: I don't think they did that. But this time, having learned from their mistakes, I think, instead of just picking someone and saying, "Here's our choice," they narrowed it down to some semifinalists. I think there were five or six semifinalists, who then were to come and be interviewed by key members of the boards of the institutions.

In preparation for that, they wanted to give those people a resource that they could call and talk about the institution. That way they could better prepare for their interviews. And I was that resource. The only one who didn't call me as a resource was Tom Schwartz because he, more than any human being on earth, knew more about this institution. So he had no need to talk to someone who knew even less about it than he did (laughs). But the rest of them did. I spent a lot of time on the phone with all of them, and I think one in person. I think Karen Witter, I think I might have talked to in person. They

were all very impressive as far as the questions they asked and what they were seeking to understand.

It turned out that Eileen Mackevich, from what I hear—I wasn't in with the boards when they talked with each of these candidates—she came across the best in that particular interview process. She had obviously done her homework, in preparation for that interview.

DePue: What were her credentials coming into it?

Blanchette: She was the head of the national [Abraham Lincoln] Bicentennial Commission, the one that little underfunded Illinois trumped, as far as publicity. At the time, she had actually badmouthed Illinois efforts as not suitable or whatever, and here we kicked their ass as far as publicity. But now, here she is in charge of the institution that was at ground zero of it.

DePue: Do you remember some of the other candidates?

Blanchette: Yeah. There was a gentleman, a young gentleman from a museum in Rockford, that really impressed them. They almost offered him a deputy director spot at the museum because they were so impressed with him. But they didn't think he had enough experience to go from where he was at to then heading an institution like this. I don't recall what his name was. And then, of course, they were impressed with Tom, but not... I don't know how he did in the interview, and I don't know why they didn't choose Tom.

Oh, I've got to tell you a story about Tom. He may not know that we actually did this, but Governor Quinn was the governor at the time. We somehow caught wind that this panel that were choosing the new director for the library/museum was not seriously considering Tom as a front runner. We thought—and, by “we,” Jennifer Tirey, the deputy director of the institution and myself and some other key people here thought Tom needs to get serious consideration for this position because he continues to bring a lot. He's like the father of this institution. Rather than give him short shrift, the governor needs to be aware that Tom, even if they recommend someone else, he ought to consider Tom as well.

I tried to get word to the governor to that effect, but I couldn't get through the people who were around him, to get that word to him. So Jennifer and I put our heads together and we thought, "Who can we have call the governor that can make Tom's case?" And we thought, "Well, Doris Kearns Goodwin," who had been here for numerous book signings and was just very active and very approachable, and I happened to have her private cellphone number (laughs).

I called Doris Kearns Goodwin, and I said, "Our friend Tom Schwartz, he's got a chance to be director of this institution, but we have to convince some people that he is a really strong candidate. Would you mind calling Governor Pat Quinn and making a case for Tom Schwartz?" And so she did.

[She] called him right up. I talked to her afterwards. She said, "We had a lovely discussion. He's a big Lincoln fan, a big history fan, lovely discussion. I told him all about Tom." I said, "Did he give you any indication what he wanted to do?" She said, "He said he would see what the committee had to recommend." I thought, "Good. We've put in a good word for Tom. We had one of the most eminent historians on earth calling the governor of Illinois, who's got the final decision. We think Tom's got a good chance.

So we were crestfallen when we heard that Tom wasn't even considered seriously. Well, I guess he was considered seriously by the panel, but he was never the front runner with the panel that made the recommendation to the governor, and the governor just took their recommendation and went with it.

DePue: Had you ever considered putting your name in?

Blanchette: No.

DePue: Why not?

Blanchette: I'm not a historian. I didn't have a history of running an institution; I just had a history of publicizing it. So there is much more management, oh, and fundraising. I had absolutely no experience with fundraising, and that was to be a major portion of the job.

DePue: So Eileen Mackevich it is. I believe she started in December of 2010.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: Here's an indelicate question. One of the things that comes out is that she was already into her seventies at the time. Was there any concern about her age?

Blanchette: There was, but she was very sharp. It didn't seem like it was going to be an issue. Now, there's a story I have to relate. Once the word was out that she was going to be the choice, Bill Houlihan, who's chief-of-staff for Dick Durbin, I ran into him and he says, "Oh, I hear you're going to hire Eileen Mackevich. We had to deal with her on the national Bicentennial Commission." I said, "Oh, yeah. What do you think of her?" He kind of laughed, and he said, "She's an acquired taste." I said, "What do you mean by that?" He says, "Tell you what. You're going to grow tired of her after a few years."

DePue: So how was your initial relationship with her?

Blanchette: Very good, very positive. Seemed like she had a lot of good ideas, like bring a fresh perspective. She had connections we didn't have from other sources. The skeptic in me was a little bit less skeptical for a while.

DePue: Where was your office at this time?

- Blanchette: Let's see, 2010, it would have been mostly at the museum, but I also had to maintain an office in the Stratton Building because we were still a separate communications shop in state government.
- DePue: What were some of the ideas that she was bringing that were impressing you?
- Blanchette: Just special event ideas, the initial trial of Mary Surratt for the Lincoln [assassination] conspiracy. Having real lawyers and judges try that case was a good idea. We kind of beat that dead horse, though, by having way too many of those, in my opinion. Having it once, it was successful. Maybe twice you could do it, but not every year. [Continues with examples] Just some of the authors, kind of off-beat Lincoln authors, maybe somewhat out of the mainstream that we might not consider, seemed to go pretty well. It just seemed like a little bit different approach maybe could be helpful.
- DePue: Did she impress you of having the fundraising skills that were needed?
- Blanchette: Not knowing fundraising [myself], she talked a good game. But my understanding was that it didn't translate into much fundraising.
- DePue: I know that both Richard and Rick were also chairs of the foundation. Was that the case with Eileen?
- Blanchette: No, it was not.
- DePue: And that was based on what?
- Blanchette: They had done it in order to attract Richard Norton Smith. They kept it in place for Rick Beard, just because that's the way it had always been. But then they figured after Rick Beard that...
- DePue: After the fiasco of Rick Beard?
- Blanchette: Yeah. That they need to be two separate things. And honestly, it does need to be two separate things. You can't have a guy serving two masters, or a woman serving two masters.
- DePue: I understand that perhaps one of the first personnel changes after Eileen came on board was Jennifer Tirey's departure. Do you have any insights into that?
- Blanchette: Yeah. Initially Jennifer got along very well with Eileen. I saw this pattern repeated often when I worked with Eileen, and it eventually happened to me as well, that she sees that people are coming to certain people, like Jennifer, with questions, operational questions or opinion questions or "can we do this" type of questions. And she would give an answer, like she'd always done. Well, she [Eileen] wanted everything coming through her. Jennifer said, "That's fine, I'll bring everything to you."

That doesn't stop the rank and file from still coming to Jennifer and asking. It just became a gradual freeze out process, where it got down to a point where they wouldn't even speak to each other, not even to acknowledge

each other in the hall, and that Eileen would gradually take away her [Jennifer's] duties until she had virtually nothing left. And Jennifer just left in frustration.

People that she didn't like, which became more numerous as her time here went on, the same thing would happen to them. She would freeze them out, and take away their duties so they were left with virtually nothing to do or very menial tasks.

DePue: What was it about the relationships that would start on a very positive note and then change over time? Was there something about Eileen or something about the other individuals involved?

Blanchette: Since the other individuals vary in terms of temperament and approach, I can only think that it's something with her.

DePue: We'll get to your personal relationship in a little bit then. Your selection as deputy director, I understand that was May 14, 2012. Does that sound right?

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: How did that occur?

Blanchette: When Jan Grimes announced that she was resigning, to take a job in the private sector, the position of director of the agency became open. A couple members of the IHPA Board of Trustees came to me and said, "Would you like to be considered for agency director?" And I said, "Sure."

DePue: Did you see an issue in not being an historian and being director of IHPA?

Blanchette: No. We hadn't had a historian in there for quite some time, and that was more multifaceted. I was very familiar with the agency. I said, "Sure, if you think you can sell it." So they made a good case to the Governor's Office, and I had a lot of support. I guess word was leaking out that I was being considered, and a lot of people said, "Oh, yeah, he'd be a great director. He'd be great; he'd be great." But Pat Quinn's people decided to go another direction, and they offered that job to Amy Martin.

I think, kind of as a consolation prize, they said, "We've got to give Dave something." At that time I was in very good stead with Eileen, and she said, "Well, I have a deputy director position. Why don't we just elevate him to that and give him a little bit more responsibility? He can still do PR until we hire a new communications director, and he can get a nice bump in salary." That sounded good to me.

DePue: Deputy director of ALPLM or of...?

Blanchette: ALPLM. So that's what happened. On the same day, the trustees voted to approve Amy Martin as the IHPA director and me as deputy director of ALPLM.

- DePue: Were you excited about that move?
- Blanchette: I was, because it meant quite a bump in salary, and of course, it's a bump up the ladder. So, yeah, I was.
- DePue: I kind of got the dates mixed up a little bit. June 2011, Dr. Tom Schwartz resigns as state historian. I suspect you remember that event as well.
- Blanchette: I do.
- DePue: Do you have an insight into what led to his decision?
- Blanchette: I think he felt hurt that he was passed over for director of the institution on several occasions.
- DePue: Do you have any insight into his relationship with Eileen?
- Blanchette: I think initially, like everyone else, it was probably very good, but as time went on, maybe a little more strained.
- DePue: Was he not sharing his experiences with you about that?
- Blanchette: Tom was very circumspect. He was very careful about what he said about other people, which is a very good quality about Tom. He's very reluctant to speak badly of people. But I definitely got the sense that he was getting more and more unhappy.
- DePue: You're now the deputy director here. We've talked about Eileen, to a certain extent. How well did you get along with Amy?
- Blanchette: Very well. When we were both sitting outside the trustees meeting, waiting to be called in, which turned into like an hour-and-a-half (laughs) of waiting, we got to know each other rather well. She came from DCEO, which is all about promoting things, and I'm all about promoting things. So we hit it off immediately.
- DePue: Talk about the evolution of your relationship with Eileen, and maybe also part of that is Amy, once you were the deputy director.
- Blanchette: I think Amy was warned from day one, "Eileen Mackevich is a handful; you've got to keep a lid on her." Well, Eileen didn't like to have a lid put on her, and so I think from day one there was going to be conflict. And, unfortunately...
- DePue: What does it mean to put a lid on her? What was it that was so concerning?
- Blanchette: She had a tendency to make deals with people and agreements with people that probably should be run by the administration first, to get the Governor's Office sign off, and she just wasn't doing it. She was just doing what she wanted to.

DePue: In terms of relating with people outside the institution to bring here for events?

Blanchette: Yeah or having certain agreements with people to do certain things or set up certain events. I could tell that the Governor's Office was kind of wary of her from very early on. After she'd been here a few months, you got the sense that, "Hey, why is she doing that," or "Why didn't we know about that," or "Why is she talking to that person?" So when Amy Martin came in... Amy told me this; she said the Governor's Office told her that, "You need to keep a lid on Eileen. Keep a close watch on her. Make sure we know what she's doing." Well, Eileen never likes that.

Here's me; I'm in good stead with Eileen; I'm in good stead with Amy, and I'm right in the middle, and I'm supposed to report on what one's doing, to the other one, and at the same time, make sure there isn't any funny business going on, anything that's illegal or anything that shouldn't be happening.

DePue: Sorry to interrupt, but I think this one's kind of important for me to understand and maybe for listeners as well. What's the official relationship between those two supposed to be?

Blanchette: Officially, it's nebulous because when the whole relationship was set up, it was to attract Richard Norton Smith here. To do that, they had the reporting structure, with the head of the ALPLM and the head of the agency jointly reported to the IHPA board. Well, that was never changed, even after Richard Norton Smith left. So you've got this unclear reporting structure, about who's supposed to report to whom, and you've basically got two different directors who are parallel to each other, instead of having one over all the other.

DePue: But it sounds like, when Amy was brought on board, given some instructions from the governor, that her impression would be that...

Blanchette: That she should be the head and that Eileen should report to her, exactly. That's exactly the way she approached it, and it didn't set well with Eileen. So I went quite a while, with Eileen saying, "Why is Amy doing this?" and Amy saying, "Why is Eileen doing this?" And I'd occasionally get calls from the Governor's Office, "Why are Amy and Eileen doing this?" (laughs)

Oh, also, with Jennifer Tirey gone and me being the new deputy director, people were now suddenly coming to me for decisions. So the very thing that got Jennifer in hot water with Eileen was now starting to happen to me. She knew I had a good relationship with Amy, and I think it was just the gradual ... I started to notice it; she would question many more of my decisions. She would question my motives. She gradually started taking duties away. People would still come up and approach me about problems, and she'd see that, and she didn't like it. She says, "I want them to come to me. I don't want them to come to you." It finally got to the point where I...

At that time, Ryan Croke was part of the Governor's Office—he wasn't chief-of-staff yet. That happened later—he was the person that our agency reported to. I went to Ryan, and I said, "My situation here is untenable. I just need to be moved somewhere else, or you need to get rid of Eileen, or you get rid of me. I just can't work this way. I'm just pulled in too many directions." He said, "Well, why don't you come work for us?" I said, "No, (laughs) I don't want to do that. That's too risky; that's too much stress. I don't want to do that." He said, "Well, let me see what I can do. I'll talk to the governor about it."

DePue: It sounds to me like you just described something of a—this might be too strong a word, so that's why I want to clarify here—an ultimatum. Were you laying it on the line that abruptly? It's either her or me?

Blanchette: Yes. I did that. And Ryan was a person I could do that to. Now, if it was the Blagojevich administration, I could never get away with saying that. But with this administration I could.

DePue: Were there specific incidents that led you to that pretty dramatic decision?

Blanchette: It was like a Chinese water torture. It was just drip, drip, drip, drip. And that's just the way I'd seen it happen to Jennifer; I'd seen it happen to Tom Schwartz; I'd seen it happen to numerous other people. We had been warned about it by Bill Houlihan, and now it was coming to pass. I don't know what the straw that broke the camel's back was, but I just reached a point one day where I just said, "Enough, enough. I've got to get out of this situation."

I went to Ryan, and I laid the problem on the table, and he was being very nice and very accommodating. I said, "Look, Ryan, you want to hear what I have to say?" He said, "Yeah, what?" And I said, "It's her or me." He said, "Well, we're not going to get rid of her, but would you like to come work for us?" And I said, "No, I don't think so."

So I went back for a couple of months and tried to endure it. Having not been through the situation, your listeners may not appreciate exactly how this works. But if you do the oral histories of some of these other folks I've mentioned, you'll hear the exact same pattern. Finally, I went back to Ryan, and I said, "Is that offer still open?" He says, "Yeah, it's still open." And I said, "I'd like to pursue that."

DePue: This discussion that we've just had here is very much focused on Eileen, but you're stuck between these two directors. You didn't have the same issues with Amy?

Blanchette: I didn't. No, I did not have the same issues with Amy. She had kind of a cowboy style, where you'd come in with guns blazing; that kind of style. I can deal with that. You see a lot of those types in government. So I was certainly used to dealing with that particular style.

- DePue: You kind of painted, to a certain extent, the picture of what the relationship was between those two women. But how would you describe that?
- Blanchette: Antagonistic. I think they both went out of their way to antagonize the other, and I think they both went out of their way to try and torpedo each other's careers.
- DePue: I think it was still during your watch that Bryon Andreasen, one of the Lincoln scholars, Lincoln researchers, here resigned and took a position out in Salt Lake City?
- Blanchette: Yes. He had numerous discussions with me before he did that. I don't want to betray a lot of the confidences, but he was becoming more and more unhappy with the direction the institution was going, under Eileen. He said, "I really want to stay. I really want to stay. If there's any way you think this is going to change in the near future, just give me a thread of hope, and I'll stay." I had to be honest with him. I said, "Bryon, I don't think it's going to change." So that's when he made the change.
- DePue: Linda Bee [volunteer coordinator], did she resign during that same timeframe you were here?
- Blanchette: She did, but I think she was considering retirement for quite some time. I don't think it was driven by any of the turmoil.
- DePue: Any other departures while you were here that you recall?
- Blanchette: You've got Jennifer and Tom and Brian. There were several people that threatened to leave, which are still here.
- DePue: Julie Dirksen [director of guest services] probably resigned somewhere in this timeframe.
- Blanchette: Yeah. I think that she probably just was ready to leave.
- DePue: You're looking at your watch now. I think we're pretty much done. This might be a decent place to cut it off. But this is at the same timeframe the library staff is continuing on this pretty steep ramp downscale, with no replacements. Do you have any insights into why it was so difficult to get new hires for the library?
- Blanchette: That was a big mystery. Always the Governor's Office has to sign off on new hires. It's always been that way for every administration. For some reason we just couldn't get them to take an interest in library positions.
- DePue: The Governor's Office?
- Blanchette: Yeah. And whether it be Blagojevich or Quinn... I don't know what [Governor Bruce] Rauner's office is like, but obviously we're sitting here during the Rauner administration, and the library staffing continues to decline. My personal opinion—I have nothing to base this on other than opinion—is

that you've got this big shiny thing across the street, which gets everyone's attention, and the quiet little library doesn't. It's just harder to get the people that approved the hiring decisions excited about librarians, when you've got the museum across the street.

DePue: Our next session is going to be very much about your involvement with the Quinn administration and his efforts to get reelected. But a lot has happened here at ALPLM and IHPA since your departure. To just kind of set the stage very quickly, I'm going to turn it over to you to make some reflections as we close today.

About a year and four or five months ago, there suddenly was a discussion about splitting IHPA and ALPLM. It was shortly after a series of meetings that Eileen convened the [Abraham Lincoln Presidential] Library Advisory Board, which had always been in the enabling legislation but had never met. What grew out of that was this effort to split the two institutions. Since that time, there's this great cloud of uncertainty over both IHPA and ALPLM, as well as the continued decline of library staffing, to the point where we're on the razor's edge of whether or not we can keep the place open.

Blanchette: At the heart of the whole thing, the whole initiative to split the ALPLM and the IHPA, is the personality conflict between Eileen Mackevich and Amy Martin. That is 100 percent what is at the heart of this. I think they just were sniping at each other for just so long that Eileen decided to go nuclear.

The way to do that is to call on her friend, Mike Madigan [Speaker of the Illinois House of Representatives], who rents office space from Eileen's friend, Stanley Balzekas. She was able to recommend the advisory board, people that she knew would [things] see her way. This is her way of not just a shot across Amy's bow but just [a] very blatant slap in the face, like, "Ha, ha, I'm one-upping you."

As far as the legislation to split the agency, I was literally sitting across from Pat Quinn on the state plane when he got news of that, and he was as mad as I've ever seen him. I have been working with him for quite a while now, and I've come to be one of the people that he'd talk to a lot about things and to get advice about things. By then he was well aware of what Eileen was like, well aware of what Amy was like. He says, "Dave, what should I do?" (laughs) I said, "This seems like insubordination to me. You've got somebody that works for your administration wanting to form their own new agency without talking to you first about it and going to a legislative leader to make it happen without making anyone aware they are doing this." I said, "That's insubordination. I'd fire her."

DePue: And he didn't?

Blanchette: And he didn't.

DePue: And he hasn't?

Blanchette: And he hasn't.¹⁰³

DePue: Why? Why not?

Blanchette: We were in the height of the campaign, and he thought—whether correctly or not—that firing her would escalate the situation in the news media and cast a negative light, more negative light, on his administration. He decided, and he instructed me to work with Chris Wills [ALPLM communications director], here at the agency, and several others to make sure this was characterized as a much more local squabble than something of statewide significance because he was afraid that, if it became a campaign issue, with such a close race, that it might negatively impact his chances of being reelected.

DePue: But there has been plenty of negative press, hasn't there, since this has blown up?

Blanchette: There has. But you'll notice that not much of it touches the Governor's Office; most of it touches the ALPLM or the IHPA. So, we did exactly what he instructed us to, and we did it successfully. We pretty much kept the Governor's Office out of it. And the standard response for the Governor's Office was, "We'll form this commission, and they'll make recommendations, and we'll follow the recommendations." And, by golly, those recommendations came either right before or right after the election. So we were able to say, "We'll take that under advisement." and so just kind of kicked the can down the road.

Then, after he lost the election, we thought, Now's the time to make some of those moves, so let's go to them and say, "Okay, now you can get rid of these people who have pissed you off." By that time I had been with the Governor's Office, and we had a much broader view of state government. This was not the only thing that he should have acted on and gotten rid of people; this is by far not the only thing. We went before him with several of these. "You ought to get rid of so-and-so. You ought to change this. You ought to change this." After he lost the election, he pretty much just lost interest in doing this kind of thing. He just let it slide and figured, "This is a problem for the new administration. We'll just let them handle it."

DePue: Lost interest or thought it would be more appropriate that the new governor had the chance to make decisions like this?

Blanchette: Governor Quinn liked to make the decisions. He liked to be the one to chart the course. So I just think his heart wasn't in it after he lost the election. And there were several causes that he still felt strongly about, but these were not among them.

¹⁰³ Sheeen Mackevich later resigned, under pressure from Governor Rauner on October 16, 2015. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eileen_Mackevich).

DePue: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but would you characterize what's been going on here in the last couple of years as a dysfunctional institution?

Blanchette: It's a dysfunctional relationship at the top.

DePue: What are your feelings, your reaction, to watching what's been going on here?

Blanchette: It sickens me, makes me sick to my stomach.

DePue: How would you like to close our discussion about the library and museum?

Blanchette: I still think this is one of the greatest institutions, not only in the State of Illinois but in the United States of America. I think the reason it is great is because the people who have designed it and who have run it and who continue to be involved in it, by and large, are what make it great and will continue to make it great. I'll continue to be interested in this institution, no matter how far removed I ever become from it physically. It's a part of me.

DePue: Proud of your involvement with it?

Blanchette: Exceptionally proud.

DePue: And the most exhilarating moment of your time of the many, many years you had at both IHPA and ALPLM?

Blanchette: There are two. The moment that we opened the museum in front of 25,000 people and the world press, also being in the room with new President Barack Obama, celebrating Lincoln's two hundredth birthday.

DePue: Let's end on that positive note for today, Dave.

Blanchette: Okay.

DePue: Thank you very much.

(end of transcript #3)