Joe Strickland
Chief Reporter, Office of Official Reporters

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript
November 14, 2018

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC

"But it's the feeling of being a fly on the wall as history is happening. That's what really turned me on about [the job]. That's what I try to make people realize when they would think, 'I don't know if I want to come here.' It's like the best job! It is. If what you're going to do is sit in a room quietly and listen to other people talk—you know, they're going to run for President! You know what I mean? It's like, it's history. That's, I think, the most important thing."

Joe Strickland
November 14, 2018

Table of Contents

Abstract

From 1993 to 2015, Joe Strickland worked as an official reporter in the House of Representatives, becoming chief reporter in 2005. In the first half of his oral history, Strickland explains machine stenography—the action of writing shorthand on a machine—and how it differs from typing on a computer. Instead of typing each letter in a word, stenographers record syllables. Strickland demonstrates the technique, which he likens to playing chords on a piano, using a circa 1950 La Salle stenotype machine from the House Collection. He compares the older machine to his modern model, pointing out the dramatic difference in technology.

In the second half of the interview, Strickland describes his career in the House of Representatives. He discusses the differences between reporting on the House Floor and in committee hearings and recounts the State of the Union Addresses and other memorable Joint Sessions of Congress he witnessed. Strickland reflects on the historic moments he experienced throughout his tenure and encourages young reporters to seek a career in the House.

Biography

For more than two decades, Joe Strickland worked as an official reporter in the U.S. House of Representatives. In 2005, he became chief reporter.

With modern machines, stenographers use shorthand to record speech at 225 words or more a minute. Strickland began learning stenography in 1990, in Richardson, Texas, after he earned advanced degrees in music. He practiced on an electric manual machine which used ink, paper tape, and an electronic component that advanced the paper. When he graduated from court-reporting school, he purchased a computer-compatible machine and started his career as a live closed-captionist with a local TV news station in El Paso, Texas. A year later, he moved to Washington, DC, and worked as a freelance court reporter. With the encouragement of one of his colleagues, Strickland interviewed with the House of Representatives and was hired as an official reporter in 1993.

At the time, the House split reporting work between two offices: the Official Reporters of Debates Office covered the proceedings on the House Floor and the Official Reporters to Committees Office reported committee work. Strickland began his House career in the committee office. When the offices merged in the 104th Congress (1995–1997), Strickland volunteered to cross-train and work on the floor, which involved learning parliamentary procedure and a specialized rotation schedule. As chief reporter, Strickland oversaw the production of transcripts for the *Congressional Record* and led the transition to a completely paperless reporting process. During his time in the House, he reported several Joint Sessions of Congress and State of the Union Addresses.

Strickland retired from the House in 2015 and continues to work as a freelance court reporter. His current machine is completely computerized and translates his stenography into English on the screen.

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, http://bioguide.congress.gov and the "People Search" section of the History, Art & Archives website, http://history.house.gov.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:
"Joe Strickland Oral History Interview," Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives (14 November 2018).

Interviewer Biography

V. Grace Ethier is a researcher, writer, and oral historian for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned her B.A. in history from Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. She co-authored *Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Congress: 1900–2017* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2017) and leads web production for the oral history team.

— JOE STRICKLAND —

ETHIER: This is Grace Ethier with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. Today's date is November 14, 2018. I'm here with Joe Strickland, former Chief Reporter in the Office of the Official Reporters. We are in the House Recording Studio in the Rayburn House Office Building. We're going to talk about his time as an official reporter, as well as look at some stenotype machines. Thank you, Joe for being here today.

STRICKLAND: Thank you.

ETHIER: We're going to start off with an easy one. Where did you grow up?

STRICKLAND: Well, I grew up in California. I was born in Texas, grew up in Southern California, in San Diego, graduated from high school there, and then went back to Texas and went to college in Texas.

ETHIER: What did you want to do for work? What did you major in?

STRICKLAND: When I was in high school?

ETHIER: Yes.

STRICKLAND: I thought I was going to be a doctor. I went to college as a pre-med student, but I was a musician. I had always been a musician, and music kind of won out. I ended up graduating with a degree in music from the university that I went to in west Texas.

ETHIER: What did you do for work before you learned stenography?

STRICKLAND: Well, much to the chagrin of my parents, the day I graduated from college with a degree in music, I started training in travel. Because of my music and

performing, I started traveling a lot, and I got the travel bug. I went into the travel business immediately after college and ended up opening my own travel agency, which I ran for about 10, 11 years. It was when we sold our travel agency that I started thinking, what do I want to do? What I wanted to do was get away from managing people and get away from worrying about a small business and all the things that go with a small business.

Court reporting to me sounded like the perfect job because it's me and a little machine in a little case. I can move and live anywhere I want to and ply my trade and never have to supervise people, never have to worry about payroll, never have to do all those small business things. So I went to court reporting school in the Dallas area and graduated in 1990 and took my first job in the reporting field in 1990 as on-air captioner for a local television station in Texas.

ETHIER: You touched on this, but if you want to say anything else—how did you hear about stenography? And if you want to say anything more about what drew you to it.

STRICKLAND: Well, the way I heard about it is totally happenstance, which is sort of how things happen in life, isn't it? I was having dinner in a restaurant in Dallas, and one of my airline representatives happened to be in the restaurant. She introduced me to her sister. She said, "Oh, my sister's going to court reporting school," and a conversation ensued. As I walked away from that table in that restaurant in Dallas, I thought, "Well, I could do that." They say to you when you're training for stenography, they say it's a two-year program, but if you're clever, you can do it in 18 months. Well, I thought, "I'm clever. I'll do it in 18 months."

ETHIER: {laughter}

STRICKLAND: Well, that's not true. It's like asking somebody, how long does it take to learn to play the piano? Some people pick it up quickly, and some people it's a little harder. I was in my mid-30s, and it took me about two and a half years to get out of court reporting school. And it's not the learning of the shorthand. It's the learning of writing shorthand at 225 words a minute. I'd liken it very much to musical training because some people pick up stuff quickly, and some people it takes a little bit longer. So it took me about two and a half years.

ETHIER: I was going to ask that question about similarities between music and stenography. Is that why you thought you were fit for stenography, because of your musical background?

STRICKLAND: Well, ironically, to be perfectly honest, I thought it's something I can be the sole practitioner of my career and be totally in control and not be responsible for anybody else again. Because running a small business, you spend your whole life taking care of the business and supervising people and monitoring people. So it is kind of ironic that as a reporter I ended up supervising people and being responsible for other people here at the House. But you follow the path that you're on, I guess.

ETHIER: Great. I want to move into the simple question of what is stenography? Why is it used? What does it involve? Things like that.

STRICKLAND: Well, stenography is basically shorthand. Shorthand has evolved over the years from pen shorthand—which some people are familiar with, like Gregg pen shorthand—to machine shorthand. The stenography that I employ and that the House Official Reporters employ is machine stenography, which is just basically shorthand. So, instead of typing the word "those" with "T-H-O-S-E," we strike a chord—sort of like you do on a piano—and we write "T-

H-long O-S." It makes the sound of the word "those," but you've only stroked the machine one time. You shorten and shorten and shorten. You end up with phrases that allow a human to listen and write instantaneously at speeds from minimum 225. And then I know people who write 300 words a minute, but they're like freaks of nature.

ETHIER: {laughter}

STRICKLAND: For example, "House of Representatives." How many syllables is that? "House of Rep-re-sen-ta-tives." That's seven strokes on the machine, but I write it in one. Anybody who works here would write [it] in one. It's just a way of shortening the spoken word so that it can be translated into text, which is basically just a voice-to-text kind of translation.

And of course, now everything is done by computers. When we write on our computerized machine, the machine instantly translates it into English. It's the same technology that's used in live captioning for the hearing impaired on television—when the guy is standing on the side of the waves crashing, and he's talking about a big storm coming, and instantaneously the captioner is writing what he's saying, and it's being translated as closed captions on the television. It's the same process.

ETHIER: So stenography is computerized shorthand. And shorthand is focused on the syllables, the sounds of the words instead of the letters that make up that.

STRICKLAND: Exactly. And pre-computer, pre-real-time—we call it real-time, this type of writing where it goes instantaneously into English—homonyms like "there," "their," and "they're" would all be written one way. But when you get into real-time, you can't do that. You have to have "T-H-E-R-E." And then you

have to have "T-H-E-I-R." And then "T-H-E-Y-apostrophe-R." You have to have three different ways of writing it.

Shorthand used to be a lot simpler than it is now because now we're writing for real-time translation. Even if we're not streaming immediately to television or streaming to big giant screens at a concert or something, we want to shorten the amount of work we have to do on the transcript, which is why it's so important here in the House because everything is daily copy. Everything is instant copy. Some things are rush copy. So you're always in a hurry to get the exact words out, and you want it to be accurate. The people who work here are very, very talented stenographers.

ETHIER: So for the three different versions of "there," you have different strokes for that?

STRICKLAND: Exactly.

ETHIER: Cool. Again, you touched on this, but why is it more effective than typing?

STRICKLAND: It's faster. You can't type 225 words a minute.

ETHIER: Can you talk a little bit more about stenography school? You were in Dallas?

STRICKLAND: Yes, I was in the Dallas area. I went to school in Richardson, Texas, which is like a suburb of Dallas. They start out by teaching you the theory. The theory is what key makes what letter on the machine. But it's not a key per letter. Obviously there are not 26 keys on the machine. There are combinations of keys. You strike two keys, and it becomes another letter. And then you strike four keys, and it becomes yet another letter or a different sound. We actually think in sounds rather than letters because we're not thinking typing letters. We're thinking typing sounds. They begin in court reporting school, even

today, teaching you the theory of what those sounds are and how to make those sounds on your machine. That's the easy part. That's the easy part. You spend the first I don't know how many months learning that—probably a couple or three.

Then the whole rest of the time is speed building. You start out at 20 words a minute, and 30 words a minute, and you build up. They test you all along the way. I've described to somebody as it's the only training where the minute you get good at something, they push you further, and then now you're failing every day. You go to school every day, and you fail, and you fail, and you fail, and you fail. And then you pass, so then they push you into the next speed area. But the object of the game is the long-term goal of hitting the minimum required so that then you can get certified and begin working.

ETHIER: What were classes like? Was it playing a recording, and then you would be writing?

STRICKLAND: Well, when I went to school—this was in the late '80s—it was a brick-and-mortar school with classrooms and live teachers and live dictation and live two-voice dictation and live three-voice dictation. Now there are very few brick-and-mortar schools. Everything's being done via the internet. Some of those classes are being done live. Some of those classes are being done by recorded dictation, but the process is the same. It's just how they're delivering the process is different now.

ETHIER: How long did it take you to feel comfortable in front of a machine?

STRICKLAND: {laughter} Well, as I said, the minute you feel comfortable, they push you faster, and then now you're not comfortable again. I wanted to throw my

machine out the window. It's so frustrating. And I had a mortgage. {laughter} I wanted to get out there and start working, but it's a process. Even now I am working freelance jobs now, now that I've retired, and I come back, and I go, "Oh, I've got to shorten that. I've got to change that. I've got to fix that." Because you want to come home with basically a translated job and then just go through and put commas. You know what I mean? And it's possible. It's possible.

ETHIER: How did you practice while you were at school?

STRICKLAND: While at school, in class, they would dictate to us. That would be a practice. Then we would read our notes. We were working on paper. Even though we were learning the computer theory, they were having us train on paper so that we could read shorthand from the paper notes. And then during practice lab, we would use recordings. There would be speed recordings that were read to you at certain speeds. You could start fast and go down to slow. Or you could start slow and go up to fast. It depends on how you practiced it.

ETHIER: And would you practice at home?

STRICKLAND: Always.

ETHIER: How?

STRICKLAND: Always. Same way. I had tapes.

ETHIER: Okay.

STRICKLAND: Remember cassette tapes? {laughter}

ETHIER: Yes. {laughter}

STRICKLAND: I had cassette tapes. We all had cassette tapes that were professionally recorded by the National Court Reporters Association. We practiced on those. When we could write those and pass—the minimum pass rate is 95 percent, so 94 is a fail. You had to pass at 95 percent. Once you could pass three of those tests in a row at 95 percent, then they pushed you to the next level. Now you're failing every day again.

ETHIER: It starts all over.

STRICKLAND: Yes.

ETHIER: Can you describe your first stenotype machine?

STRICKLAND: My personal very first machine was made by Stenograph. It was manual. It had no electronics at all. It fed a paper tape, and it had a ribbon like an old timey typewriter ribbon that you had to ink. You always had ink on your hands when you were working on the machine.

Then, while in school, I upgraded to an electric manual machine, which means it was exactly the same except it had an electronic thing in it that helped advance the paper. So when pushing down the keys on a manual machine, that actually is pushing the paper too. So it's a little extra pressure that you're dealing with. The electric machine, the paper was advanced electrically, so you didn't have to do that. But it was still, you had to ink it, and it was still a mess, and the paper still fell out of the tray. I didn't buy a computer-compatible electronic machine—even though they existed, they were very expensive, they were like $5,000 or $6,000—until I got out, and was working, and I could actually afford to buy one.

ETHIER: I think we can move on to the object portion. I just have a quick intro for it. So this machine next to you is a La Salle stenotype machine from the House Collection and has been brought to the recording studio by my colleagues, Mackenzie [Good] and Morgan [Russell] in the Office of Art and Archives. The machine is dated circa 1950 and was used on the House Floor by the official reporters. Joe and I are going to talk about it, how to use it, and compare it to a more modern version of the stenotype machine.

Can you describe the different parts of this machine? And let me know when you want your key.

STRICKLAND: So this is a paper machine. This is what the paper tape looks like. You see how faded it is? It's because nobody uses paper anymore. There's a tray in the back that pulls out. The paper goes in here. Let's see if I can remember how to do this. It feeds in here, and it comes out there. So as you write, of course {presses keys}—oh, there's even ink in it.

ETHIER: Wow.

STRICKLAND: As you write, it advances the paper. The part that you've written, in a perfect world, folds and lays right back down on top of the paper that's feeding through. So, see what it's doing? In a real world, the fold of the paper's always backwards, and it falls out of the paper, and you end up with this pile. But they're still talking, so you can't stop to fix your paper. So the paper just falls, so you rip it off and leave it there.

ETHIER: Very dramatic. {laughter}

STRICKLAND: Very dramatic. There's nothing electronic in this machine. There's a wheel in here with a ribbon that you ink. There's still a little bit of ink coming out,

which is kind of amazing to me. The keys on this machine are exactly like the keys on a modern machine now. The shorthand that the person who wrote on this machine can write on a modern machine, an electronic machine. It probably won't translate because he hasn't worked out all of his conflicts with the homonyms and stuff. I'm going to turn it [the machine] back. These keys are initial consonants. These keys over here are final consonants. And these four keys down here are the vowels.

So an easy word to write would be like "cat." "K-A-T." It's the sound of cat—not the spelling of cat, right? So that's easy. It looks like cat. They used to call it the SAT test, "S-A-T" because it looks "S-A-T" on the paper.

It's when you start making combinations of letters. Like see these four keys? [T-P-K-W] That's "G." So that looks like garbage to anyone who doesn't know shorthand. The other thing that's cool about the way shorthand works is not only are these final consonants sounds, but there are sounds like "shun," like "convention." These two keys make the "shun" sound. There's even an "unction," like "function." So you write "F-U-unction." See how you're writing—you're playing chords basically on the keyboard to make words. "House of Representatives." That's my "House of Representatives," {presses keys} like that. And it comes up "H-O-U-P-S," hopes. But it translates on the computer as House of Representatives. So anyway, that's how it works.

ETHIER: Great.

STRICKLAND: That's basically exactly the same, except now you have to take this paper, and some poor schlub has to type that and translate the shorthand again. So you needed a well-trained stenographer. But then you also needed a well-trained transcriber who could read the steno and then turn it into English and type

it. Now that function is done by the computer, matching your steno with your dictionary of steno strokes to translate it into English.

ETHIER: Would the translator sort of be trained to the stenographer's dictionary in a sense? So they would see the "House of Representatives" and know that it was House of Representatives?

STRICKLAND: That's exactly how it works. The transcribers would learn theory just the same way the reporter would learn theory. They would have to be able to take this paper tape and go through it and accurately translate that reporter's steno into English.

Now, my steno will be different from your steno because I went to school in Dallas, and you went to school in Iowa, and they taught two different theories. That becomes an issue too. So quite often—I know when I first came to the House in '93, every reporter was paired with a transcriber because they had to know how to read their steno. But now that's not necessarily true. As a result, the reporters in the House office are all pooled into however many transcribers are working with them because they don't have to know exactly all their steno.

Now, I write a really weird theory. I learned a computer-compatible theory, which is really weird. It helps to resolve conflicts and things, these homonym conflicts. Well, a transcriber who's been doing this kind of work would look at my stuff and go what is he doing? That's where the computer kicks in. The computer, if I write it correctly, the computer will translate it the way it's supposed to be. Only if I hit the wrong key—when you're flying you hit the wrong keys, and if you hit the wrong key and the word doesn't translate, they may not be able to figure out what I was trying to write. But then they can

just tag it, and I'll check it later. That's how we did it back in '93. It's not an issue anymore.

ETHIER: Did you ever train as a transcriber?

STRICKLAND: No.

ETHIER: No, not on that side. You brought in this handy key. Can you explain that just a little bit?

STRICKLAND: Obviously the keys on the machine don't have letters on them like a typewriter might, but this is just showing what each key signifies in the alphabet. So as I said, these are the initial consonants. These are the final consonants. And then these are the vowels down in the lower keys. By making a combination, for example, "T" and "K" together, is the "D" sound. If I write "dog," it's going to say "T-K-O-G." It doesn't make sense unless you know shorthand. If I write "gone," these four keys make the "G" sound. It's going to be "T-P-K-W." It's going to look funny on the machine, but it doesn't matter what it looks like in your notes as long as it translates on the computer. These are the final. "F-P-L-T" in most theories is the period. So you're writing along, and it comes to the end of a sentence, and you hit all four keys. That's the period.

ETHIER: What are the two in the middle?

STRICKLAND: These asterisks are the magic key. {laughter} Remember I was talking about "there," "their," and "they're?" So I write "T-H-R," and it translates "T-H-E-R-E." I write "T-H-R" and put an asterisk with it, and now it's "T-H-E-I-R." See what I mean? This just is an options key that lets you do what we really, really, really, really need to do.

In real world—let me think of an example. Like if they say "Defense Appropriations Act." And they say "Defense Appropriations Act" over and over. And we're talking about the "Defense Appropriations Act" and the "Defense Appropriations Act." They say those kinds of phrases over and over and over, you can just make up a way to write that. What I would probably do is "D-P" and throw an asterisk in it. So the steno that I'm writing is "D-asterisk-P," but I define it as "Defense Appropriations Act." Now I can get beyond that and write the rest of what they're saying. See what I mean?

ETHIER: Yes.

STRICKLAND: So that's like the magic key, the little extra key.

ETHIER: Cool.

STRICKLAND: And you notice they put the "D" and the "Z" on the far left because you have "E-D" endings and "E-S" endings, or "S" endings. You always want that on that side of the keyboard because it's the end of a word. So, anyway. This sounds horribly boring.

ETHIER: No, it's not.

STRICKLAND: But it's kind of cool.

ETHIER: It's really cool.

STRICKLAND: You know who's really good at learning this now are young people who play video games because it's kind of like a video game now. They learn it on the computer. They learn it on the internet now. They put their headphones on, and it's like they're playing a video game. Those are the people who are really sharp. There's one guy I know who is not even 30. He's in his 20s. He's

captioning all over the world doing giant screens in stadiums because he got into it because of his sort of video game mentally. And {snaps fingers} it clicked for him immediately.

ETHIER: Wow, so music and video games.

STRICKLAND: {laughter} Exactly.

ETHIER: Going back to your "gone" example, you're pressing down on all of those keys at one time?

STRICKLAND: It's a sound. Think of it as a sound. So, yes, you're pressing down the "gone" sound all at once.

"String." "S-T-R-I-N-G." "String," all at one time. Because it's a sound. You're not typing individual letters. And now—because people talk so fast. They really do talk faster now. Even one stroke per word is too much. You have to shorten your writing by coming up [with ways to shorten] phrases. "If I had been. If I had been. If I had been." I don't want to stroke that in all those [syllables]. You come up with ways to shorten and shorten because you can only move your fingers so fast, right? If people are talking 200 words a minute, you can move your fingers about like this {medium speed}. But if people are talking 250 words a minute, you're going like this {much faster speed}. The faster you're writing, the messier your writing becomes. You want it to be accurate because you have to turn it in tonight before you go home, right? You shorten, shorten, shorten your writing and come up with phrases and come up with—we call them briefs. A brief way of writing things.

The first brief—I'll never forget—was in 1993 when I first came to the House. I started in March, so it was appropriation season. The first brief I had to come up with was "appropriation" because they kept saying "appropriations, appropriations." I couldn't do three strokes every time they said it. The second one was "infrastructure." They said "infrastructure" every single—"We have to invest in infrastructure." I was writing infrastructure, "in-fra-struc-ture." You can't do that. You have to shorten, shorten, shorten. I just came up with a brief, and I write it like that now after all these years because it gets in your brain. And you go, "Oh, I have a brief for that." {laughter}

ETHIER: It sticks, wow. I'm thinking when you said if "I had been, if I had been," you have to write fillers, too? Like when people say, "You know?"

STRICKLAND: Oh, yes. Because our job is to write what they say. Our job isn't to edit what they say. It's to write what they say.

ETHIER: I'm wondering about the posture of stenography. I don't think it would be what you just did with the—

STRICKLAND: Can I show you with my machine?

ETHIER: Yes, please.

STRICKLAND: This is my machine. It is an electronic machine, which obviously has an LED screen. As I'm writing, it's translating into English. My notes are over here. You can see what the shorthand looks like, like gobbledygook code and stuff.

ETHIER: And that would be the tape in the other machine.

STRICKLAND: That's my paper tape.

ETHIER: Cool.

STRICKLAND: Exactly. You don't have to have that on your screen. It's an option. But I like to see that because if it doesn't translate the way I thought it should, I can look over and go, "Oh, that was my fault. I did something wrong." So I like to keep my steno visible.

But you're going to be sitting in a chair for hours and hours and hours. You are not in control of the schedule. You have to be in a position where you don't get into excruciating agony and have to ask somebody, "Can we take a break?" because you never want to—and then of course, in the House, we're totally out of control. You want your arms parallel to the floor and sitting up straight and balanced. Some people tilt—my machine won't do this, but some people tilt their machine like this {angles machine upwards}—

ETHIER: Wow.

STRICKLAND: —so that they don't have to bend their wrists so much. I didn't learn to do that, so I don't do that. But I've been told it's very good for carpal tunnel reasons. But I find that as long as I can keep my arms parallel to the floor, like this, then I don't have any issues. It's the sitting that will kill you. It's not your hands. It's the sitting in a chair for hours and hours that will kill.

ETHIER: I assume that they have stands for machines like [the older version].

STRICKLAND: Yes. If you look—oh. This one doesn't have a tripod thing. That's interesting. I've never seen this model, but usually, yes. There's a tripod. Sometimes in movies and on television, you'll see an old—it's 2018, and they're in a deposition or a hearing setting, and they'll have one of these old machines sitting on a table. And the poor person is writing like this.

ETHIER: That's not how it goes.

STRICKLAND: Although, I will say on *House of Cards*, where they recreate the chamber of the House so well I think, the stenographer who plays the stenographer used to be a stenographer in the House.

ETHIER: Oh, really?

STRICKLAND: Yes. She's actually a real stenographer. That's her real machine. She's gotten to play the stenographer in *House of Cards* since they hired one, so it's a great gig for her.

ETHIER: That's great. Can you compare the one that you use now and the older one? I mean, there are some obvious differences, but is it basically the same?

STRICKLAND: Well, as I mentioned, the keys are in the same position. The keys mean the same things. The thing that's different is everything else. For example, the touch on this, I can scroll these wheels, and I can make the depth of touch be almost like this {minimal hand movement}. Whereas this machine has a depth of stroke that's this deep. That means you're doing a lot of this {emphasized hand movement}. Minimizing movement helps you with speed.

The other thing obviously is that this machine has a computer in it, and it's translating my steno into English instantaneously. It has an LED screen. It has a search feature. For example, back in the day when they would say, "Joe, could you read that back, please?" You have to dig in this tray of paper and do this {mimics searching through paper} until you find what it is they want you to read. And it's all in shorthand. So you have to switch your brain to the read-shorthand part of it. Whereas on this, you can hit a key, and it'll jump

to where you want to go. Everything is so much better and faster and more accurate now.

ETHIER: I'm also wondering about maintenance, with those machines, the older ones versus the newer ones.

STRICKLAND: Well, on the older ones, you always carried ink, and you always carried a spare ribbon. And you always carried oil because they get noisy too. So you oiled them. Sometimes the ribbon would get ripped, so you'd have to stop the job and pull out the ribbon and put in a new ribbon. Now you're covered in purple ink. But other than that, there's not a lot of adjusting to be done on these things. You have to stop to change paper because the pads of paper are about this tall. When you run out of paper, you have to just stop and re-feed the paper.

With these [new] machines, the maintenance is kind of like maintenance on your computer. You send it to somebody every year and let them do—because there's no ribbon. There's nothing really that I can do to maintain this machine because it's a computer. I don't want to mess with it. It costs too much. {laughter}

The House, by the way, has—geez, I don't know how many—probably 40 of these machines, except they have the next model. This is the model before the hot one. I'm going to use it until it dies. Then I'll spend $6,000.

ETHIER: I want to talk about transitioning to new machines and who decides when you get new machines. But I'm trying to think if we want to talk more about this object, so they can put it back in its home. Is there anything else you want to say about that machine?

STRICKLAND: They were workhorses. I've seen videos of old House hearings that you see the people working on those things. And you talk about posture because you'll see everything. Like some people wrote like this {hands up high}. Some people wrote like this {hands down low}. But they were workhorses, and they lasted forever as long as you maintained them. They still today do what they did. If you can find someone to transcribe your steno notes, you can still work on a machine like this. It just takes longer.

ETHIER: In the House, are you responsible for the upkeep of your own machine?

STRICKLAND: No. The House owns the equipment, maintains it. That was one of my jobs actually. We had this bunch of machines, and they had to be serviced regularly. But you couldn't do them all at one time. So I had a rotation schedule that we would keep track of what was being done when, which one was up next, who needed—if somebody had an actual problem. It's a computer. Sometimes they go whacky. Then we would pull that one out of the rotation and give them a loaner and send that one off. But it was all done in the Office of Official Reporters. It was one of our responsibilities then.

ETHIER: Did you have favorite machines? Like, "Oh, I got this one." Or, "Shoot, I got the one with the broken 'F' key," or something.

STRICKLAND: Well, that's funny you should say that—remember I said every reporter has their own way of writing, style of writing? Well, there are different key tops. Certain people want the asterisk key to be double wide so that you can hit—see that crack right there? They want the double-wide key to touch that key so that then when they hit a stroke that has an asterisk in it, they just hit that crack, and it gets both at the same time.

Some people like a wide "D-Z" key. Some people like a wide "T-S" key so that when they send their pinky over there, they can hit two keys at once instead of having to use two fingers. Reporters are very particular about—when I hired people, one of the questions on the form was what kind of key tops do you want? Because it's going to take me three weeks to get the machine fixed the way they want it.

Depth of stroke is another adjustment that's very personal with people. And then some people like pads. They take these little sticky rubber things, and they stick pads on their keys so that—I don't know why, but it's a touch thing. This is all a touch thing. If that touch is what you're used to, then you're going to be a better writer if you have what you want, and it's set up the way you want it to be. My only thing was I would get them their key tops, I would buy them their pads. But if you leave, it's your job to get those pads off, and clean the keys. {laughter}

ETHIER: Good rule.

STRICKLAND: I'll get all that glue on there.

ETHIER: Well, we can take a break, so we can move this machine out of here, and then we'll continue to talk about your time in the House.

STRICKLAND: Okay.

END OF PART ONE ~ BEGINNING OF PART TWO

ETHIER: So picking up where we left off. You came to the House, and they already had computerized steno machines.

STRICKLAND: I came to the House in 1993. In 1993 there were two offices of reporters. There was the Official Reporters to House Committees, and there was the Official Reporters of Debate, which handled the debate in the chamber. Two different chiefs, two different deputies, two different crews of people. They didn't have anything to do with each other. The floor was still using paper machines and dictating to transcribers in '93. In 1993 the House committee office—because of the volume of work that they handled—had already gone to the computer. And frankly, I think that's why I got hired because I was trained to write to the computer, and they had gone on to the computer. They were looking for people who didn't have to be cross-trained, right?

We didn't have the internet. We didn't have a way to communicate with one another. We didn't have email. We didn't have a way to look up things. So we all had volumes and volumes of notebooks of terms and phrases and names and things pasted on the wall because we had to be able to turn these transcripts quickly. We had little research time to do so. So, yes, we were on computer, but it was just in the committee side.

ETHIER: When would you get new machines in the House? Who decided when you got new machines?

STRICKLAND: Well, it's basically two things. It's the development of technology, what's changing, because we want to stay abreast of what's happening. Although I used to joke, we're always one click behind because we want to make sure it's—we don't want to be beta testers in the House. We want to make sure it's all going to work, and then we would be the next wave. That's a decision for the chief of the office to make the recommendation.

You know the Office of Official Reporters is part of the Clerk's Office. And so ultimately the Clerk makes the call on anything and everything that that

office does. But she or he relies on the chief of the office to do what the chief should be doing, which is stay abreast of what's going on, know what needs to be done to make the office more efficient. I would say it's a recommendation of the chief, but it's a call of the Clerk.

ETHIER: And would the chief ask the Official Reporters who are on the floor or in committees if it's time for new machines?

STRICKLAND: You don't have to because they will tell you.

ETHIER: They'll let you know. {laughter}

STRICKLAND: I'll never forget. You notice my machine's paperless. Even when machines went computer, they still produced paper. That paper was our backup. But we never really used it because it was all—remember floppy disk? It was all going onto a floppy disk, and we would pop the floppy disk into the computer and translate everything and toss the notes in the drawer.

I'll never forget the day I made the recommendation that we need to upgrade our equipment, and we need to get paperless machines. We had to have a meeting on the House Floor with representatives of the Speaker's Office and the Parliamentarian's Office and the Clerk's Office and everybody. And I had to demonstrate the machine. I said, "It's the same machine. It's just we don't need the paper." "Well, what's your backup?" And I said, "Well, our backup is three SD cards." It's just as technology changes, everybody has to sort of get on board. It's a communal effort here in the House. They gave me a thumbs-up, and we bought the new machines, and we haven't had paper machines here since.

ETHIER: Did the office keep the paper?

STRICKLAND: For a while. For a long while. For a long while, yes. Until it became obvious it wasn't necessary.

ETHIER: So sort of touching on what you're talking about. When you got new machines, was there a period of—did it require more training?

STRICKLAND: It always requires more training when you get a new piece of equipment. Depending on who we bought the equipment from, we would go to them, and they would send us a trainer. And we work on it.

Think about your phone. How many times a year do you update your phone? Well, it's the same thing with any kind of computer equipment. Any time there's an update to the software or to the machine software, we have to do those updates. Then we have to discuss what just happened. Why did we do that? What's going to be different? How does it change? Constant training.

ETHIER: With the software and also the machines, was it always better or was there ever a change that you were like, "Wow, I wish we didn't do that. I miss my old machine."

STRICKLAND: Well, for a reporter, it's all about what does it feel like because it's an automatic motion. It's like, again, I go back to music. It's like playing the piano. Some people like a firm Steinway touch on the keyboard. Some people grew up playing on a Baldwin. So any time the key feel changes, that's a big deal to a reporter. But as long as it does what it's supposed to do everywhere else, I think we're good.

ETHIER: Were some people in your office hesitant about moving to new machines, to digital machines, to the digitized process? Do you want to talk more about that shift?

STRICKLAND: You remember I told you that when I came in '93, the committee office was already on that road. But in 1995, the leadership of the House changed. And with the new Speaker and new leadership in the House, there was a new Clerk. There were a lot of changes administratively in the way the House had been run. They created the Office of the CAO [Chief Administrative Officer] that year. One of the things they did is they merged the two reporting offices. So the committee office and the floor office—I call it the floor office or the chamber office, debates office—merged into one division. Now for the first time, we're all working as one big organization. The fellow who was chief of the committee office became the chief of the combined office. His first edict was that the floor now was going to get under the same platform so that we're all trained on the same equipment.

There was a little pushback to that because reporting on the floor is unlike the reporting in the committees in that it's not strictly word-for-word verbatim. There's a lot of parliamentary procedure involved. There's a lot of inserted titles and inserted sections. We called it parliamentary language. So they created "include files" for a lot of those kinds of things that used to have to be typed in. So the reporter could write a stroke, and it would pull in that "include file," and put in the parts that people didn't actually say. I'm trying to think of an example. I can't think of an example. But there was a big training process there. Plus, you had some of the floor reporters who had not worked with a computerized machine. They had to learn just the mechanics of working with the software and working with that. It's not really about the

machine. It's about the software and what the software does. So, yes, there was a steep learning curve in I would say '95.

ETHIER: Great. I want to talk more about the '94 election and '95 because then you switched from committee to floor as well. But first, let's go back to Official Reporters. What role do Official Reporters play in the House, and what are the office's responsibilities?

STRICKLAND: Well, as I mentioned, we come under the aegis of the Office of the Clerk. Our two primary responsibilities are producing the House portion of the *Congressional Record* as far as the debates in the House Chamber. All of that has to be done and sent to the Government Printing Office [GPO, now the Government Publishing Office] that night so that it appears on the internet the next morning and it's printed in booklets and it's on the desks of the Members the next morning. That's a huge, major job.

Then the other responsibility has to do with House committees. When I left, there were 24 committees. I don't know how many are here now, but let's say there are 24 committees and about a 100 subcommittees. That's a lot of meetings going on. The committee office is responsible for providing reporter coverage for every single one of those. Obviously, we can't gear up staff to surge to that maximum, so we use some contractors in committees. We had a list of contractors that we went through a bidding process. They helped us with overflow, but we covered with our employees the core part of the work. In other words, everything we could. When what we couldn't, we would assign to contractors.

There's a lot of classified work. The committee reporters are responsible for covering Intelligence [Committee] and Defense [Committee], Armed Services [Committee] kinds of things. Our people had high-level security

clearances to be able to have access to that kind of information. We never, ever contracted those kinds of things out. We covered the Rules Committee. We never contracted the Rules Committee. There were certain things that we always kept, we had to keep, and we wanted to keep. Then other things perhaps we had to send to a contractor.

ETHIER: So you said you were working as a live captioner in Dallas.

STRICKLAND: Well, actually it was in El Paso.

ETHIER: Okay.

STRICKLAND: It was in West Texas. I'd just crawled on my hands and knees out of school. I was so anxious to get out and start earning a living. The first job offer I got was in El Paso. It was with a local television station. My job was to do live captioning for the evening news five days a week. That was all my job. It sounds like it would be easy, right? Because the news comes on at 6:00 and it's over at 6:30, and now I'm done. But it was my very first job, and there was a lot of dictionary building to do and a lot of prep. And you never know exactly what they're going to talk about, so you prep for everything. You read the paper, and you see what they're going to talk about. You read the sports, and see what high school won. You make sure that the name of that high school was going to come up right. Things like that.

Almost immediately when I got there, we had a huge gubernatorial election. Ann Richards was elected governor. They elongated the news for hours and hours and hours, and I was *the* captioner. So I was doing it all for hours—right when I got there.

Then we invaded Iraq, and the war started. El Paso has got a military base, so it's a big, big story. We were on the air for hours and hours and hours. It's kind of like, everybody talks about their first job, baptism by fire. That was my baptism by fire. I was writing live to television. Now, it was closed captioning. The hearing impaired—back in those days, you didn't have a chip in your television. You had to have a box on your TV to be able to translate the captions. But in El Paso, because there's such a large English-as-a-second-language community, later that night, they replayed the news, and they open captioned for everybody because it helped people who spoke another language to learn English by reading—so basically it was open caption for the whole viewing audience. I stayed there a year, and I moved to Washington after that.

ETHIER: And were you in the studio doing this? Or is this something that you can do off site?

STRICKLAND: Yes, I was in my court reporting office doing everything with the headphones. It was so archaic when I think back to it because it was just the way we—you remember—well, you probably don't, but you hook up to a modem and the modem would go whooo! Make that sound. That's how old-fashioned it was. But it worked. It worked. It was great experience. It was really good. It taught me a lot. It forced me to get more accurate and get faster.

ETHIER: So it didn't stop at school. You finished school, and then you were put in a place to be pushed further.

STRICKLAND: It never stops. I had a job Friday, and I was changing the way I was writing things. Because if I hear a phrase four times, I'm figuring out how to brief

that because it's a waste of effort and energy and speed to write the same phrase over and over and over and over and over.

ETHIER: And that's in the moment, too, figuring out how to brief that.

STRICKLAND: Right. I should never go senile, right?

ETHIER: {laughter} Right. So you stayed there in El Paso for a year. How did you hear about the Office of the Official Reporters for the House?

STRICKLAND: Well, there was a freelance job in between. I was hired by a Washington, DC, freelance firm. We moved up here, and I did depositions and arbitrations, and that kind of reporting for them. A guy who had worked for that company that I never met because he wasn't there anymore—everybody talked about him. "Oh, he went to the House. Oh, he went to the House." So when I finally met him, he said, "You should interview at the House." That's kind of how I ended up—I kept saying, "Oh, let me get another five years of experience." He said, "Do you write to the computer?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "You passed your test?" "Yes." He says, "Come interview." So, and that's how I ended up coming up to the Hill.

ETHIER: And my next question is what was the interview process?

STRICKLAND: Then?

ETHIER: Yes. For the House for you.

STRICKLAND: Well, it's actually a testing process because they send you in to a hearing, and you sit side-by-side with the Official Reporter who's actually taking the hearing. But you sit side-by-side, and it gives you an opportunity to see what it's like, see what the room is like, see what it's like when you have 50 people

on the dais and they're all going to say something, and you have to figure out how to designate their speakers so that you don't confuse who's talking. It's rather daunting. I just remember—this is one vivid thing. I didn't want my boss to know that I was interviewing. I walked in the room, and there were television cameras everywhere. I thought, "Oh, great. Now I'm going to be on TV." Then they evaluate your work. Then they call you in, and you have sort of a sit-through interview. That's how it happened back then.

However, my experience level was so shallow at that point. I had only been actually working for like two and a half years. They asked me to do it again. I went into another hearing. That one went really, really well. I turned that in, and then they asked me to do it again. I think they wanted to make sure that what they were seeing was not a fluke. So I sat in three times. All three times went well. Then they said, "Well, we would like to bring you on board." Then the House went into a hiring freeze. For a year I knew that I had a job waiting as long as the hiring freeze was lifted. Eventually it was, and I got a phone call and came up to the House.

ETHIER: We've been talking about this—the House of Representatives uses specialized language. How did you prepare for this new system?

STRICKLAND: Well, how did I prepare before I came?

ETHIER: Yes. Or I guess part of your training, maybe. How did you learn this specialized system?

STRICKLAND: It was sitting in hearings and listening to it. As I said, when you hear the same thing more than three or four times, it has to become something that you're going to find a way to write. And also, doing committee work, one day you're listening to Armed Services and things about the military and all

the acronyms and all the weapons systems and things. Then the very next day, you're in Natural Resources [Committee], and they're talking about some salamander in a pond somewhere. Now you're trying to figure out what they're talking about. Then you go to Appropriations [Committee], and it's NIH [National Institutes of Health] doctors talking about research. Every single subject matter is totally different.

You remember I had mentioned that because we didn't have access—there was no internet to search things on—we saved everything. If I had a word list, I saved it and put it in a notebook, and I put it under Appropriations. I still have those notebooks, by the way. I don't know why. It's kind of like saving your high school yearbook. I don't know why, but I spent so much blood and sweat and tears building them, I don't want to {laughter} get rid of them. But you saved everything.

I came in in March of '93, and President [Bill] Clinton was inaugurated in January of 1993. All of the Cabinet members—we had these sheets with all their names and everything. I pasted it on my bulletin board thinking, "Now I know who the Clinton Cabinet members are," not realizing that Cabinet members come and Cabinet members go. And so you're constantly scratching people out and changing things.

ETHIER: A lot of steno sources that I read talk about putting terms in your dictionary.

STRICKLAND: Right.

ETHIER: So this folder that you created, that was one of your first House dictionaries?

STRICKLAND: Sort of.

ETHIER: Before you could program it into the machine?

STRICKLAND: It was names and terms and weapons systems and BRAC [Base Realignment and Closure]. Remember BRAC? All these bases that were being closed, so all the base names and things like that. Then ultimately they would go into what we called job dictionaries. I had an Appropriations job dictionary, and I had an Armed Services job dictionary. They were different. It not only has terms, names, places, weapons systems, but it also has speaker identification because we have to make sure that the words we write down are attributed to the right person.

That's a big deal for reporters coming to the House because most reporters who come to work here have been doing depositions where there's maybe five people in the room. Or maybe they're coming from a courtroom where there's a judge and maybe five or six attorneys. Then you walk into a big hearing, and there's 75 Members on the dais, and five of them are all named Davis. You know what I mean? So you have to make sure that you have discrete ways of writing and attributing names to people and stuff like that. That was a big prep. I put a lot of that kind of stuff in what I called job dictionaries.

ETHIER: I have so many questions about everything that you just said. So these job dictionaries, these are physical folders?

STRICKLAND: They're electronic folders.

ETHIER: Okay. On your computer.

STRICKLAND: In my court reporting software. Right.

ETHIER: Okay. And this is connected to your machine?

STRICKLAND: It can be connected to the machine, but the way the House—the way the process works here—now, when I report, I have a cable going from my machine to my laptop. It's coming up in English on my machine, and it's coming up in English on my laptop. In the House, the reporters sort of tag-team. Say we have a hearing in Science [Committee]. I'm assigned to the first hour. Then you're assigned to the second hour. If it's still going, then I'll go back and take the third hour. That's one way that they are able to get the work out and done in the time frame that is required.

So we don't hook up a laptop in the hearing room. We just take our machine. Then when it's time to go back to the office, we pop the SD card out of the machine, and pop that SD card into the computer at our desk and work on it there. And those job dictionaries are resident there on the network.

ETHIER: Can you describe a way that your dictionary may differ from your colleague's dictionary? But then also this concept of sharing and building dictionaries together?

STRICKLAND: Well, nobody shares dictionaries together. But what we do is, like I said, I used the example of "infrastructure." I wrote something. Well, somebody will go, "Do you have a brief for 'infrastructure?'" I'll say, "Well, I write this." They go, "Well, I use that for "New York City." I can't do—" So we do share ways of shortening our writing, but it's so personal to you and how your theory operates. If my personal steno dictionary melted and died today, I can't report on yours. As a result, we have eight gabillion backups of those dictionaries. Of course, on the House now, everything is on a giant network. They back it up for us, and then we back it up on our little SD cards, and keep it in the bottom drawer. I have one in a safety deposit box. I mean, it's

your career on a little thing, you know? But I can't write on your dictionary. You can't write on mine because it'll all come up gobbledygook.

There was one reporter who worked for me here who learned the funky kind of theory that I learned. I wrote on her dictionary one time just to see how much I had changed over 20 years. It was pretty good. It wasn't as good as mine, but it was pretty close. There was a big court reporting school in Iowa. Wonderful, wonderful court reporting school in Iowa. They turned out some of the best reporters I've ever known. They all shared the same core dictionary. But then, as your career goes along, you add and change and tweak.

ETHIER: And the dictionary is made up of your strokes for different words and different phrases.

STRICKLAND: Exactly. It pairs the steno to an English translation. And it pairs it so that when the software sees the steno, it changes it to English, yes.

ETHIER: Thank you, awesome. So when you first started in the House, did you practice outside of work?

STRICKLAND: Oh, yes.

ETHIER: How did you do that?

STRICKLAND: With cassette tapes. {laughter} Or you can turn on C-SPAN.

ETHIER: Well, that's what I was wondering if that's what you did.

STRICKLAND: You can just turn on C-SPAN. I know people who would come for job interviews, would always say, "Well, I turned on C-SPAN, and it's

impossible. It's impossible." Then they turn out to be the best reporter on the team.

ETHIER: So C-SPAN is helpful. Your first position in the House was working for the committee office.

STRICKLAND: I was hired as a committee reporter. Then the job changed in '95 when they merged the offices. We all just became Official Reporters. But it was a nerve-wracking transition. I was new. I had started in '93, and it's only been two years. I loved my job. I didn't want to lose it. The chiefs started talking about the fact that we're going to start cross-training people, committee reporters to work on the floor. And I raised my hand. I said, "I'll go, I'll go." I like was the first person because I wanted to keep my job. I figured the more things I knew how to do, I could keep my job. So I went over to the floor, and I ended up working there about four or five years I think. Then I came back to committees. Then I ended up as the deputy chief in the committee office, running that office while the chief ran the floor office.

ETHIER: Can you describe a typical day when you were working for committees?

STRICKLAND: Most committee hearings start at 10:00. Sometimes they're a little earlier, but let's assume most committee hearings start at 10:00. The different committee offices call the Office of Official Reporters and say, "Hey, we have a hearing on this day. Put this on your calendar. Put this on your calendar. Put this on your calendar." Or they send email notification, and the clerk in our office would collate all that and put together a schedule. The day before the hearings, the chief or the deputy, whoever was responsible, would create a schedule for the following day and assign people. "You're going to be on this. You're going to be on that."

So you left—say it's a Monday, and the hearing's on Tuesday—you left work on Monday knowing what time you had to be in, whether you were first, whether you were second, whether it was rush, whatever the delivery requirements were. You could prep a little bit, pull out the names of the committee members, pull out your job dictionary and go through it.

Then you'd come in to work. We liked people to be in about an hour before. You roll your machine off to the committee, get everything all set up, plug into the sound system. If you're first, you take the first hour. Usually there are panels of witnesses. You get the names of the witnesses and make sure that you're attributing their words to them. If they have a written copy of their remarks, you ask them for a written copy of the remarks because that's going to save you a lot of research. Quite often what would happen is these are all leaders of industry. These are very, very important people or else they wouldn't be calling them to come testify before Congress.

Let's go back to the salamander. They know everything there is to know about the pond and the salamander, right? They have an extensive presentation that they want to give. The chairman gavels in the hearing and welcomes the members of the panel and then says, "And we'd like you each to summarize in five minutes." You look at the table of witnesses, and they get this like horrified look on their face of, "I've got at least 45 minutes here." They start flipping through trying to figure out what they can summarize. And you know the committee told them that, right? You know they knew that they were going to have to summarize, right?

One way they approach is they just read as fast as they possibly can read. They just go at 90 miles an hour. The reporter's just closing their eyes trying to hang on, trying to hang on. At the end of that hour—or when the panel is

finished, then the Members start asking questions. The Member questioning is very regimented. They'll start with this side. Then we go to this side. Then we start with the Ranking Member. Then we go this side Ranking Member. So you sort of know what to expect, right? But with the opening statements, you never know what to expect. You just have to like gird up and be prepared.

Your relief comes in an hour. They have previously set up their equipment. They get all settled. They get their seating chart and make sure they know what's going on. If you've written down any terms for them, they notice what terms you might have written down, and they prep for that in their machine. Then they wait for a change of speaker. Say Mr. Jones is asking a question. Well, as soon as Mr. Jones puts a question mark on his question, they tap the table, and then they take over, and then now you can close your files and pack up and go back to the office and start working on the part that you took. Is that what you mean about process?

ETHIER: Yes. Absolutely.

STRICKLAND: Hopefully, the goal is that you finish running through that hour of text before you have to go back and take another hour, which doesn't always happen. But you hope for that. My job was always to poke them, encourage them to do that, but the most important thing is to get it right. If it's going to take some magic on it, then that means it's going to take a little bit more time. Once the reporter has gone through and checked the things that they want to check, then it's handed off to an editor. We call them editors now. Transcriber, scopist, whatever, lots of terms. And then they take it and put it into final form while Reporter A is back getting another hour. That's sort of the sausage-making process.

ETHIER: Great. I'm curious about the prep work. So you know that you're going to be reporting on a committee about this salamander. Do you do research on previous Science Committee hearings? Do you put in the name of the salamander into your dictionary? Do you look at who the witnesses are going to be and plug them into your machine? Things like that. How much prep work would you do?

STRICKLAND: It depends on how much time you have. The Rules Committee, for example, usually meets in the evening. If you're the reporter assigned to stay until the Rules Committee finally meets, then perhaps you will have a lot of time between then and 9:30, or whenever the Rules Committee finally meets, to prep for tomorrow, right? It just depends on whether there's time and how much you have access to. Now you can Google the witnesses and get all sorts of information about them. I do that on depositions now. You Google the witness, and you Google the lawyer, and you kind of try to guess what they're going to talk about.

But going back to the music analogy, people always are saying people can play the piano or any instrument with such facility, so fast, it's kind of amazing. I always say, "Yes, but they know what note comes next." We never know what's coming. We just have to sit there and wait for the words to come out of their mouths and still do it with the facility of a pianist playing Chopin or something. At least they know what notes come. And they've played it before, hopefully.

ETHIER: So when you have 11 people named Davis, what's your trick to keep track of who is talking in your mind and then also when you're writing?

STRICKLAND: Well, in a committee setting where there are so many people, seating charts are your friend. We always make sure we have a seating chart so that you can make sure—which one is which, right? Smith, Smith, Smith, Smith, right?

Different reporters do it different ways. Some reporters write numbers. I don't like to do that. They'll do one, you know, one Davis, two Davis, three. I don't like to do that. I would always make up different ways of writing that same word. So you could write "Davis." Or you could write "Dave." Or you could write "Da." You can think up things. If the Member's name is J. Davis, you could write Dave with a "J" at the end, "Daj." You just have to come up with something, and then remember what you came up with.

Now, one thing that helps in committees—it doesn't help on the House Floor—but one thing that helps in committees is they speak in order usually. They're going down the row. They're going down the row. You know the order that they're sitting in. That helps keep people straight. Now, on the House Floor, the reporters are sitting in the well. The Members just walk up. The Speaker says, "The gentleman from California is recognized." He never says his name, so you have to either know who that gentleman from California is, or we have clerks who sit behind us on the front dais. They're writing down, that's Davis of such-and-such. Or that's Jones of such-and-such. They're giving us a little yellow sticky note of who the speakers were in the order that they spoke, so we have a failsafe there.

But in a committee hearing, it's a little easier to keep tabs because you've got a seating chart. You've got the fact that they're sitting on a dais in a prescribed seniority order. That helps, too. But the worst, worst thing you can do is put one guy's words out of another guy's mouth because everything's political. You don't want to have anything explode.

ETHIER: So what would happen if that happened? What's the editing process for that?

STRICKLAND: If the wrong person's words were attributed to a different person? Well, if it's in a committee transcript, the committee will call and say we need to fix this. And we fix this. No problem. If it's on the House Floor, and it was published by GPO in the *Record*, that's a big deal. That's a huge big deal. So we don't let that happen.

ETHIER: But do you go back and listen to it?

STRICKLAND: This machine also is recording audio. You have the ability to do that. You don't have the time to do that. If you need to spot-check things, that's possible. But you need to be writing what they're saying and make sure. If you have a question, then yes. There's digital audio that is so cool. In the software, you're on page 100, you get to a place, and you go, "What? What did he say?" You just click right there, and the audio's right there.

ETHIER: Wow.

STRICKLAND: You don't have to look for it. You don't have to rewind and fast forward. It's time-stamp merged so that the audio is married to the text. If you had all the time in the world, you could sit and listen to the whole entire hearing again, but you don't because there's another hearing to go to. You don't have that luxury. But you have the ability. It's different things. It's the luxury of being able to do that or the ability to do that. In a committee transcript—I keep differentiating between committee and floor because what the people do in the chamber is so much more urgent rush. Time is of the utmost. But in committees, you pass it off to the transcriber or the scopist. They have access to the audio. If you didn't get a chance to check it, and they're wondering, they can check it. So there are all these backup fail-safes.

ETHIER: Great. That would even be helpful for oral histories.

STRICKLAND: You need to get a stenographer.

ETHIER: I know! {laughter} What is the most challenging part of working on committees?

STRICKLAND: Well, the thing—I can't recall, because it became such a part of my being, but when I would interview people, and they were new, and we were training—the thing that is scariest to them is that there's just so many people, so many people to keep track of. Once you come up with a good system, that's the most daunting. The other thing is they just talk so fast. You have to keep up. You have to keep up. That's hard. They talk so fast about really detailed things that matter. You have to just get good, you know?

But people who have been reporting for 20 years, who are way better of a reporter than I am, walk into a hearing room and see all those people, and they just go, "Oh, man." I think that's the thing that they think in their mind. "I can't do this." But then, they turn out to be stars. It's just a matter of learning. It's like everything else. It's a matter of learning.

ETHIER: Moving to your time on the House Floor now. How did you train to work on the House Floor? What was different?

STRICKLAND: Well, the assumption when you go to the floor is you've got the writing thing solved. It's not about writing anymore. There's a lot of training that has to do with 200-year-old stylistic things that you have to learn. Parliamentary procedures and things that are included that nobody said. "How do I know to put that?" "Well, because it's this bill. It's at this part of the bill. That always goes there." You have to learn those kinds of things.

The woman who came after me who's now the chief reporter, Melinda Walker, she could do that stuff in her sleep. Even today I would go, "Why? Why do you do—" Well, Melinda has that stuff down. As do the reporters who have been there for a while. It's a matter of repetition, I suppose, and good training. The Parliamentarian works really—and their office works really closely with the Official Reporters. Of course, they're the experts on all that stuff. If there's ever any kind of question of how should this look? How should this be laid in? The Parliamentarian has the call on that.

ETHIER: Can you describe a typical day when working on the floor?

STRICKLAND: {laughter} Well, everything that we do, everything that the reporters do is tied to the House schedule, right? The House schedule changes with each Congress, depending on who's in charge and how they manage their time. But I always used to say it was like jumping from stone to stone in a brook to try to keep from getting wet because you work, work, work, work, work, work, and then there's a break or a district work period. Then you work, work, work, work, and then there's a district work period—so you have to just keep in mind there's a district work period coming, and things are going to stop for a while.

The typical day, the House usually would come in midday at the beginning of the week. There are certain things they do at the beginning of a day, which are sort of like special orders and one-minute [speeches] and five-minute [speeches] and things like that. You kind of know what to expect. Then they go into business, what we call business. Usually you can get a clue as to what time the House is going to adjourn, but you never really know what time the House is going to adjourn. Then the House comes in again the next

morning, say 9:00, 10:00, whatever. Depending on what legislation is on the floor dictates what the schedule's going to be like.

Appropriations can go and go and go and go and go. If there's a big bill, any kind of big legislation, or divisive legislation, the debate can just go and go and go. But you know there's a rule. They go to the Rules Committee, and the Rules Committee says, "We're going to have this many hours of debate, with this much on your side and this much on your side." So you kind of know that ahead of time. But you never are quite sure whether they're going to go to the bitter, bitter end tonight or whether they're going to come in tomorrow and finish it. Usually the end of the week is shorter—truncated maybe because the Members like to get back to their districts for the work period. Or for the weekend even.

The worst—well, you didn't ask that question—I was going to say the worst day of my floor reporting was in, I think it was '96, but don't hold me to that. The government shut down. It was in the government shutdown. I came to work at 9:30 a.m., and I left the next day at 11:45 a.m. because they went all night, all through the night into the next day. We just kept going up for another turn and going up for another turn. The Members were tired and everything. My boss said, "Go home, take a nap. Take a shower. Be back at 1:30." So I got off at 11:30. I was back on the record at 1:30. We were in session again until late that night. But that only happened once, which is why I'm telling this story because I'll never forget it. It's the tiredest I've ever been. The hours on the floor can be really, really, really late. But there's no traffic when you get off, so that's good. {laughter} That's good.

ETHIER: The schedule is different than in committees. So it's every 15 minutes you switch out with someone?

STRICKLAND: Yes.

ETHIER: Why is that different than on committee? Why is it an hour on committees?

STRICKLAND: Because all the copy has to be done, edited, formatted, and transmitted to GPO before anybody goes home. Or I should say before the last person goes home. The rotation of reporters facilitates that {snaps fingers} quick turn, quick turn of the copy. If you take a 15-minute turn and there's, say, eight people in the line-up, then you have an hour and whatever that is, do the math, to get your turn translated, edited, spell-checked, and then properly formatted for parliamentary [language] before you go up and take another 15 minutes. It's a rotation that facilitates the constant forwarding of the copy to GPO.

Even when the reporter's done with it, even when the editor's done with it, then the reader of the *Record*—we all look at our little bite of this, right? Our little piece of the elephant, right? Well, the reader of the *Record* is looking at the day. We started here. We started there. This should happen. This should happen. This should happen. She has to have her time to go through that whole thing too. This is Melinda [Walker] that I was telling you about that's so good at everything floor related. She could go through and say, "Oh, there should be inserted right here." I wouldn't have known that because that wasn't in my turn. That was in your turn. She looks at the whole thing holistically before it gets sent off to GPO that night. It's a long day.

ETHIER: Yes. So you leave the floor. You plug in your SD card or something.

STRICKLAND: Right.

ETHIER: And then you check it.

STRICKLAND: Right.

ETHIER: And then it goes to an editor.

STRICKLAND: Right.

ETHIER: And they can listen to the audio if they want.

STRICKLAND: If they want, but they probably won't.

ETHIER: And then it goes to the reader.

STRICKLAND: Right.

ETHIER: Wow.

STRICKLAND: So it's a constant—it's like [*I Love*] *Lucy* [wrapping] the chocolate. It's constantly moving, constantly moving. But it's very efficient. I was involved in inter-parliamentary things with other countries. When you see how we do it and how Canada does it. Canada's like, they're so good at it. Then how some other countries have a staff of 200 or something. It's unbelievable how efficient we can be with the staff that we have because [of] the technology.

ETHIER: Do the Members get to take a look at it?

STRICKLAND: They can. The things that Members like to look at are usually their special order speeches or their morning speeches, just to make sure that it says what—and there are certain Members that always do. We know they will. Then there are certain Members who maybe will hand us their notes, and that's all we'll hear from them.

ETHIER: So they hand you their notes with revisions or corrections or anything, and then you enter that in.

STRICKLAND: Basically, yes. They can't change—like if they came out and said, "I am totally against this bill. I would never vote for this bill." And then they want to edit to say, "I really like this bill," you can't do that because the rules of the House say "substantially verbatim." There's that modifying word in there. But if they don't like the syntax, or if they don't like—if we spelled—this is a tribute to my constituent. And the constituent has a funky name, and we've spelled the funky name wrong, those kinds of things you can do.

ETHIER: What was a memorable moment for you on the floor?

STRICKLAND: I reported one [of the] President Clinton State of the Union speeches. It was my first time to be in the chamber for the State of the Union. I was on the dais reporting it. That was like an oh-my-god moment because I had never observed a State of the Union actually in the room before with the Supreme Court sitting in front of you, and the Cabinet's sitting over here. It's kind of unbelievable. Then the President walks in. It's kind of unbelievable. I would have to say, if you asked me the one that hits me between the eyes.

But I covered, I was on the dais for—put it that way—one Bill Clinton State of the Union, one [President] George W. Bush State of the Union, and eight [President Barack] Obama speeches. There's nothing better {laughter} than the State of the Union. It doesn't matter who the President is. It's just such a grand moment in congressional tradition. It's not just a House tradition. It's a congressional tradition. That's kind of overwhelming.

I will say one other moment which didn't even occur here on Capitol Hill was after 9/11. A year after 9/11, they held a special Joint Session of Congress

at Federal Hall in New York. It was the Senate, and it was the House, and the Vice President was there. I reported that. That was really very special I thought. They all walked from there to the site of the big hole in the ground. It was kind of overwhelming. But those are the kinds of things that I go, "What a job! What a great job!" {laughter}

ETHIER: How do those State of the Unions differ than a typical day on the House Floor?

STRICKLAND: Well, there is a typical day on the House Floor, up until about 6:00 or whatever time they cut off business. Then the chamber has to be swept, and they do all the security things. We become accustomed—when I say we—reporters on the House Floor become accustomed to having access to the Speaker's Lobby and access to the chamber. We come and we go, and we come and we go. Well, whenever there's a Joint Session, there's a giant security clamp-down on that. You have to have a special ID. You still have access, but you have to make sure you have that—I remember one year I lost my special ID because it was just a little plastic hang-tag thing with a hole punched in it. I put it on my ID lanyard. When it came time to go upstairs, it was not there because it had just ripped off and stuff. It was a big deal. So I would say those are the kind of things.

The other thing that's different is we can't rotate reporters in and out because of the security thing. You're on the dais. You can't get up and walk out and have somebody else come in. You sit there for the whole entire thing. There's a lot of work going on down in the basement while you're up there in the room enjoying, soaking in all of this experience. There's a lot of work going on downstairs so that the transcript will go out. But it's almost ceremonial from the reporter's standpoint for those kinds of things. But you're actually

writing it, and I keep—I still have all my paper notes. I have Clinton paper notes from that State of the Union because it's important to me. I live in a condo. I don't have room to keep all this stuff.

ETHIER: {laughter} How has debate rhetoric changed in the House since you started working? And how has that affected your job?

STRICKLAND: Well, first of all, I haven't reported on the House Floor for 18 years. So it's not fair for me to make a judgment on how things are now compared to then. But I can tell you that the change that occurred in leadership in '94, '95 resulted in a lot of—I mean, blown minds. I started seeing rhetoric change then. The Parliamentarian and the advice given to the person who's in the Speaker pro temp's chair, having to try to rein that kind of stuff in. But I don't know what it's like now. I lived through the Clinton impeachment years on the House Floor. That was pretty raucous because the divisions were so intense. But there is still a respect for what it means to have access to that microphone on the floor of the House. I think people recognize that. But I don't know what it's like now. I can't speak to now.

ETHIER: Yes, I'm sorry. Maybe not now, but what sort of change over time did you see while you were working in the House?

STRICKLAND: Well, I'm not necessarily talking about decorum, but there has been a lot of relaxation of how things are presented in the *Record*. It used to be very, very, very artificially formal. Now I think, although they still say, "The gentleman from Ohio," and things like that, I think that it's a much more informal language that actually ends up appearing in the *Record* instead of being manipulated into sort of archaic language. Does that answer your question?

ETHIER: Yes.

STRICKLAND: Okay. All right.

ETHIER: We have about 20 minutes left. And I want to move into more general questions about being a reporter in the House in terms of technology. So what other types of technology besides your machines that we've been focusing on today changed the way that you did your job? So I'm thinking like email, Blackberries.

STRICKLAND: Well, the biggest one is internet. I remember when our network first had internet possibilities. There was an effort to clamp down on what we could search. You'd be doing a hearing on terrorism in wherever. You would start searching for names and towns and people, and all of a sudden it would say, oh, you can't go there. Or—well, I shouldn't try to think of other examples. That's a perfect example. I went and pled the case that, "Hey, if we're going to have to report this accurately, we need to have access to the sites that give us that." And I know, I understand why they were being so careful because it was a long time ago. There were not as many ways to protect networks as there are now. But they graciously and cautiously opened that window for us so that we could do the research that we needed to. But the internet was huge because all those notebooks could never be opened again for the rest of my career because now we had access to the information {snaps fingers} instantly. That was a big deal.

From an administrative point, email was huge because it wasn't about memos and meetings anymore. Everything was memos and meetings, memos and meetings. Now we could communicate like with a flash. So those two things were huge.

The next one that I just—I mentioned it already—was the ability of the machine to capture the digital audio. That's huge in our industry. So I would say those three things.

ETHIER: Did you have any mentors in the House?

STRICKLAND: Well, when I first started, the chief was a guy name Ray Boyum. And his deputy was a gentleman by the name of Dennis Dinkel. And Dennis was—every year at Christmas I say, "Thank you for my career," because he was sort of a mentor for me and taught me how to manipulate my way through what needed to be done to be successful. He was always very, very, very encouraging. We only worked together two years here. Then he left, and I stayed on. But he was great.

I have had wonderful relationships with the Clerks of the House because they were our sort of big boss. But I have never worked for—I was hired by Donn Anderson. Then I worked for another Clerk. Then Jeff Trandahl came in. Jeff was really supportive and encouraging of my career here. Then Karen Haas became Clerk. She's like the best. Then Lorraine Miller came in. She was a whole different character and wonderful and supportive. "Tell me what you need," kind of boss. Then Karen came back. So I've had very, very, very fortunate experiences with the Clerks that I've worked for. I think that's why I ended up being a manager, frankly, because they were just so supportive and encouraging.

ETHIER: What is a common misunderstanding about being a stenographer, a court reporter, Official Reporter?

STRICKLAND: Well, here's the question that if I hear one more time, I'm going to scream. I heard it the day I said to the first person, I said, "I'm going to court reporting

school." This is 1987 or something. "I'm going to court reporting school. I'm going to be a court reporter." And they said, "Well, won't tape recorders put you out of business?" Then you go into this whole thing of, "Well, no, because the tape recorder doesn't put it into text," and blah, blah, blah.

I promise you if I said to somebody in a bar I'm a court reporter, they would go, "Well, why do we need that? Doesn't voice recognition—isn't that going to put us all out of business?" My comeback to that is always, "Is your voice recognition on your phone always 95 percent accurate or better? I don't think so." I mean, it's really good. It's really, really good, and it's getting better every day, but right now, real-time translation of steno is the best voice-to-text, most accurate voice-to-text. It's as good as the person doing it, right? So you can have a bad reporter, and it's not good.

I just did an eight-hour deposition of an accountant from India. I defy voice recognition to make a 300-page transcript out of that in a day. I defy it. So I'm not worried. I'm turning 65 on my next birthday in April. I'm going to work till I'm 70 because as long as I can do it, and as long as I can hear, and as long as I can sit in a chair for six or seven hours, it's the only way to produce the voice-to-text that's as accurate as what we do. So I'm very proud of what we do. I think it's a great job.

ETHIER: Cool. I read a statement from a stenographer online that said, "Most of us practically become walking, breathing encyclopedic databases of random knowledge over our career span." So I'm wondering what sort of databases of random knowledge you feel like you have from your time in the House?

STRICKLAND: {laughter} Oh, geez. Oh, geez. I don't know. But I do wish I had kept a journal. Everybody always goes, "Did you keep a journal?" I go, "No. I didn't keep a—" I should have kept a journal. Like just the other day, a thing

popped up on my Facebook. Well, now how long has Facebook been around? Not that long, right? I had posted, "Oh, I just reported George Soros today at work." I didn't remember that I had done that. So I go, man, I wish I had kept track {laughter} of all—I actually do have a list of the people—Hamid Karzai and people. I know all the reporters at the House do. They all have their list of people that they've reported. The ones that are most important to them and all.

But it's the feeling of being a fly on the wall as history is happening. That's what really turned me on about it. That's what I try to make people realize when they would think, "I don't know if I want to come here." It's like the best job! It is. If what you're going to do is sit in a room quietly and listen to other people talk—you know, they're going to run for President! You know what I mean? It's like, it's history. That's, I think, the most important thing. But I couldn't tell you like what kind of encyclopedic knowledge I have because it's probably fading even as I'm sitting here in this chair.

ETHIER: I'm sure it's there. If you were to give advice to someone who wants to go into official reporting, what would you say? What does it take to be a successful reporter?

STRICKLAND: Well, it's funny you should say that because I have spoken all over the country about this. People always say, "I could do that." What is it? So I tell them how it works. I tell them what's different about it. I tell them what's rewarding about it. But people are going to just have to give it a shot and see what they think. But you can't be the kind of person who has to have every Thursday night available for choir practice. You know what I mean? You can't have to always control your schedule because the House controls your schedule here. That's the biggest hurdle.

I used to say to people when I was interviewing them for a job, I would say at the very beginning, "The hours here are really odd and weird. You have to be very, very flexible." "Oh, it's not a problem. It's not a problem." Then about half way through I'd go, "Oh, I wanted to mention. The hours are really—" I would just keep repeating it. Then as they're walking out the door, and I'm shaking their hand, I go, "I probably didn't mention this, but the hours here are really—" because that's a big adjustment, particularly if you were a freelance reporter, and you're used to saying, "No. I'm going to get my hair cut that day. I'm not going to take that job." Or if you were in a court, and your court had a certain schedule, and you knew what time you were going to get off, those kinds of things. This job is not like that. It's a very unique job. But because it's a very unique job, it's also really, I think, very rewarding. I think it's a great place to be. It's the best place to be a reporter I think.

ETHIER: That's all I have right now. I mean, we could go on and on. But is there anything else that you wanted to say?

STRICKLAND: No, thanks.

ETHIER: Thank you so much.